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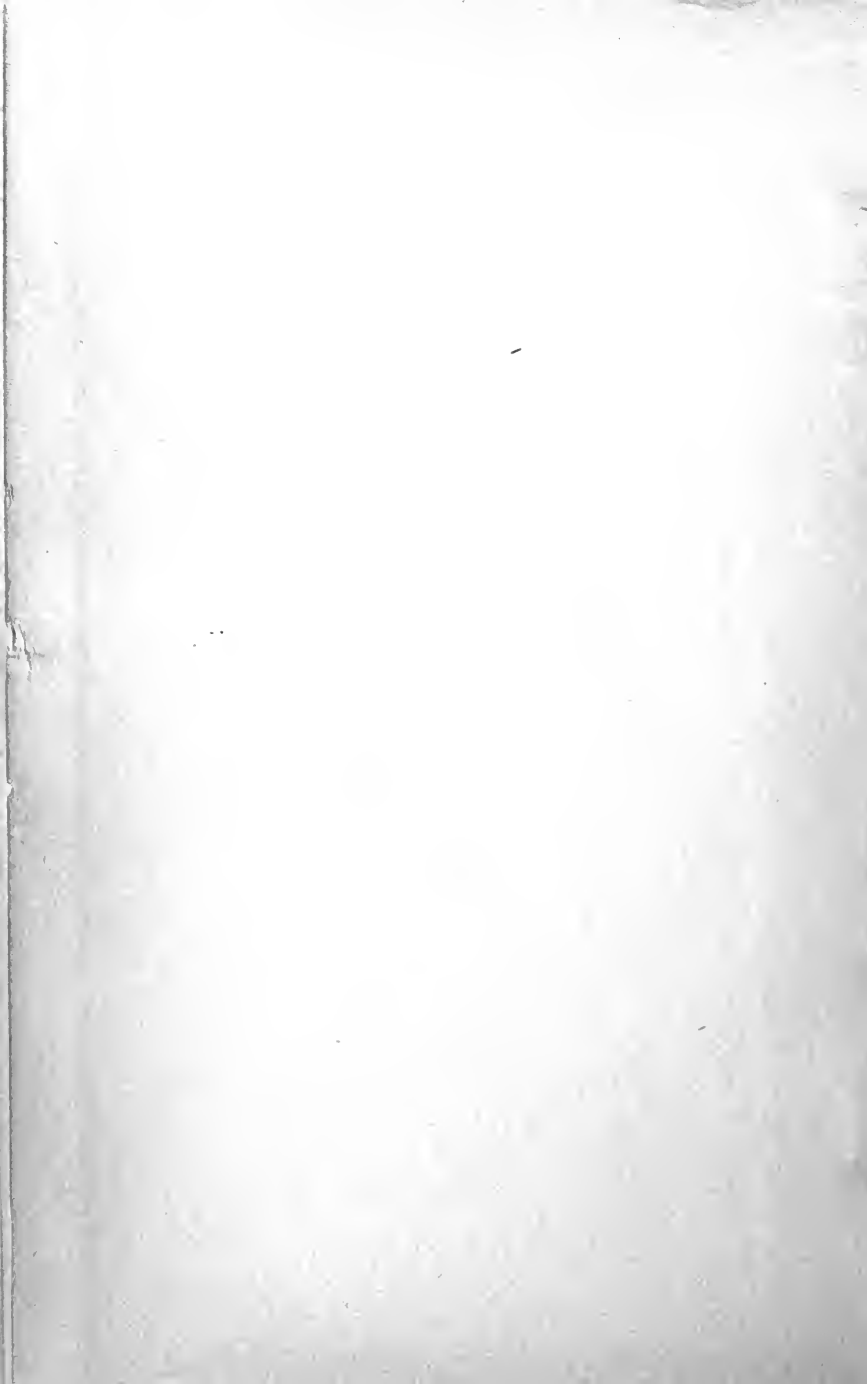
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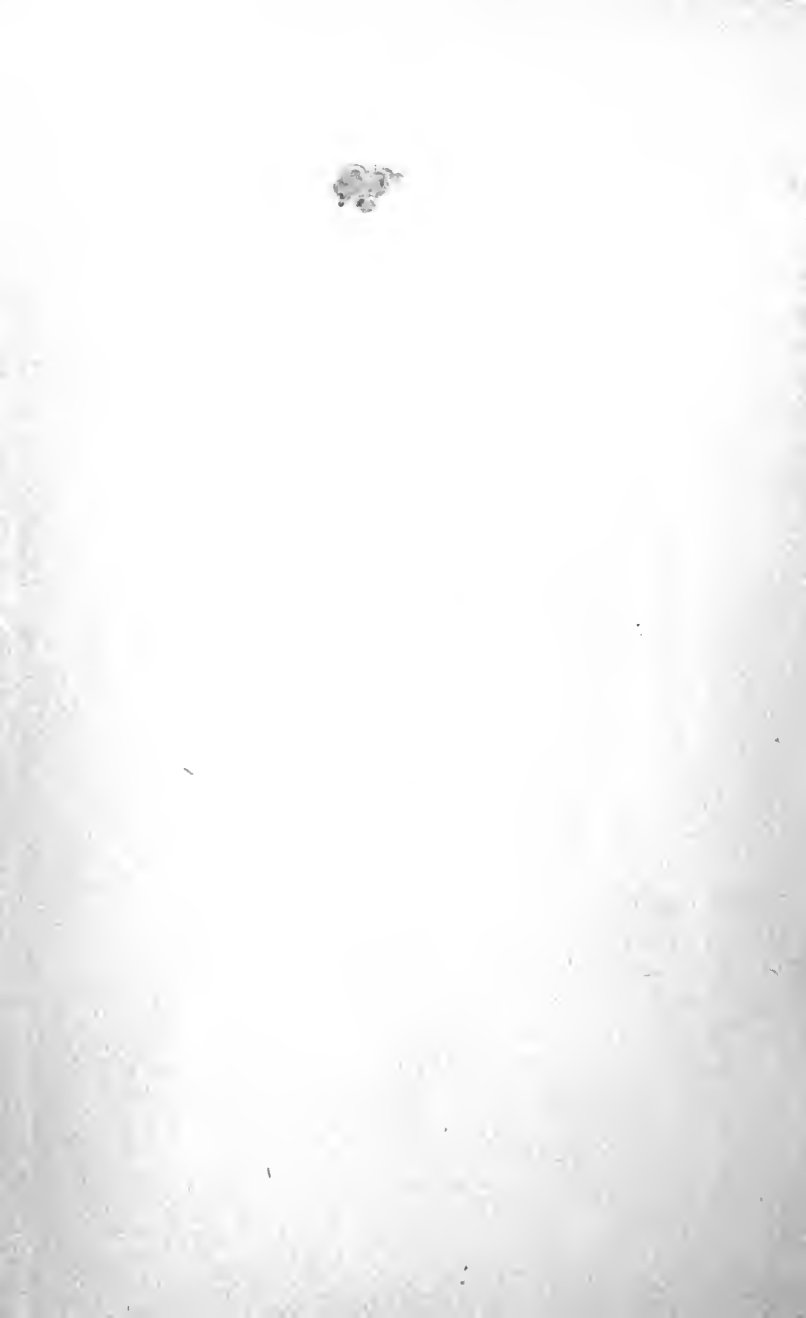
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MABEL T. STOUT
"GRAY-LAW"
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GEORGE MEREDITH
SOME EARLY APPRECIATIONS



GEORGE MEREDITH

SOME EARLY APPRECIATIONS

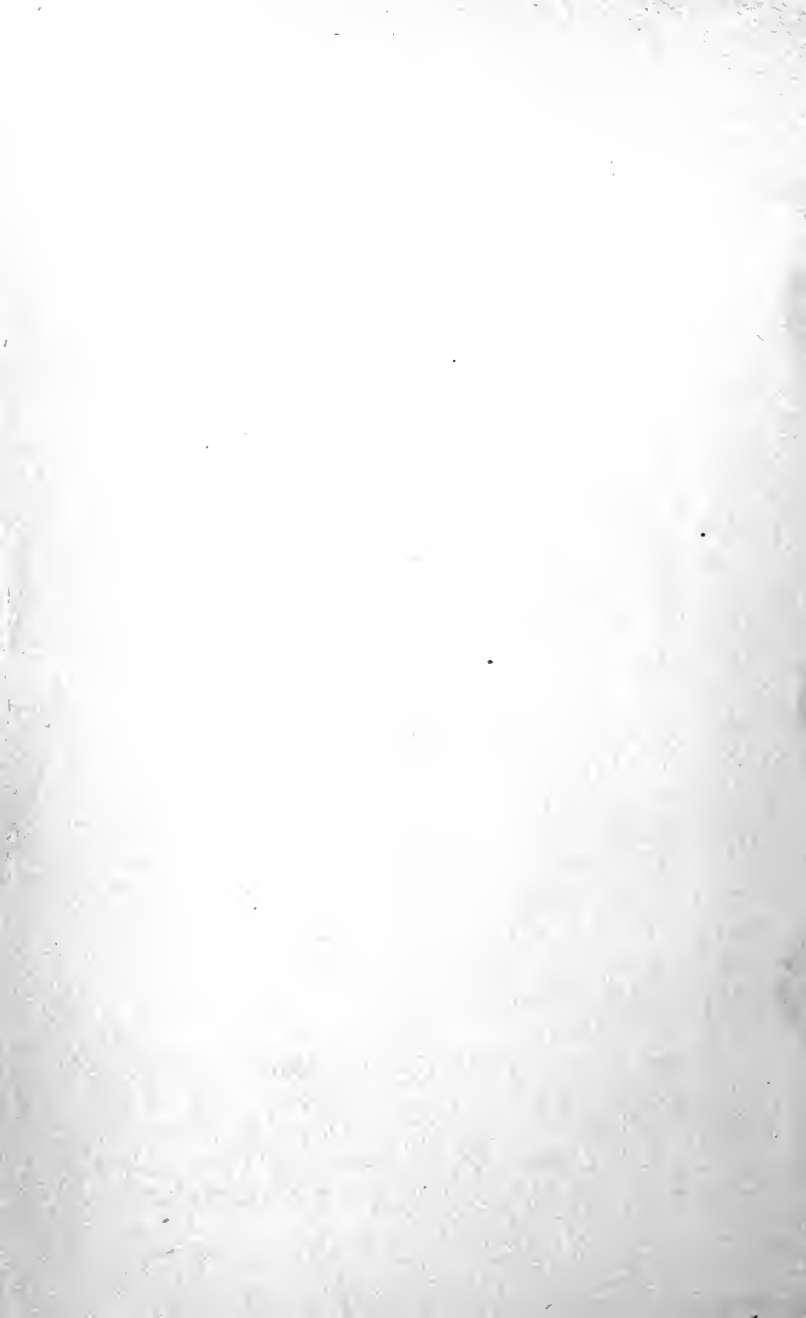
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MAURICE BUXTON FORMAN

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PREFACE

THE twenty-three articles contained in this volume have been chosen from a collection of over one hundred as worthy of preservation in a form more accessible than that in which they originally appeared. For various reasons it has been necessary to withhold several interesting papers which I should like to have included; but those gathered here fairly represent critical judgment on George Meredith's writing from the year 1851, when his first book was published, till 1883, when he issued his "Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth," the volume which immediately preceded "Diana of the Crossways"; and it will hardly be disputed that these papers from a select band of Meredith's early admirers will help the Meredith student of to-day towards a better understanding of the last of the great Victorians.

James Thomson, summarizing George Meredith's position in a review of the second edition of "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel," in May, 1879, spoke of "about thirty years' high-minded and miserably appreciated labour," and again, a few months later,

Preface

referred to William Ernest Henley's article on "The Egoist" in *The Athenæum* * as "the first clear light" he had seen, the first public utterance on Meredith "evincing the critic's familiarity with all the writer's works." Had the author of that lurid poem "The City of Dreadful Night" and the magnificent ottava rima story of "Weddah and Om-El-Bonain" gone a little further afield in his search for what had been written about Meredith between 1851 and 1879, he could not have failed to be pleased on encountering other notable Victorians who, like himself and Meredith, combined the offices of poet and critic. He would have discovered Richard Garnett, author of "Io in Egypt, and Other Poems," setting out to criticize "Emilia in England" thus:—"The announcement of a new work by Mr. George Meredith is necessarily one to provoke much curiosity and expectation," an assertion which, coming from a man of Dr. Garnett's position in the world of letters, clearly indicates that George Meredith had even then his band of admirers, in spite of the undoubted fact that his books were "caviare to the general." The admirable "B. V." would have found in that band such practitioners of both prose and verse as William Michael Rossetti (still happily active among us), Marian Evans, gone before her time, and that supreme master of song-craft, Algernon Charles Swinburne, who so lately finished his splendid career with stately utterances in prose on

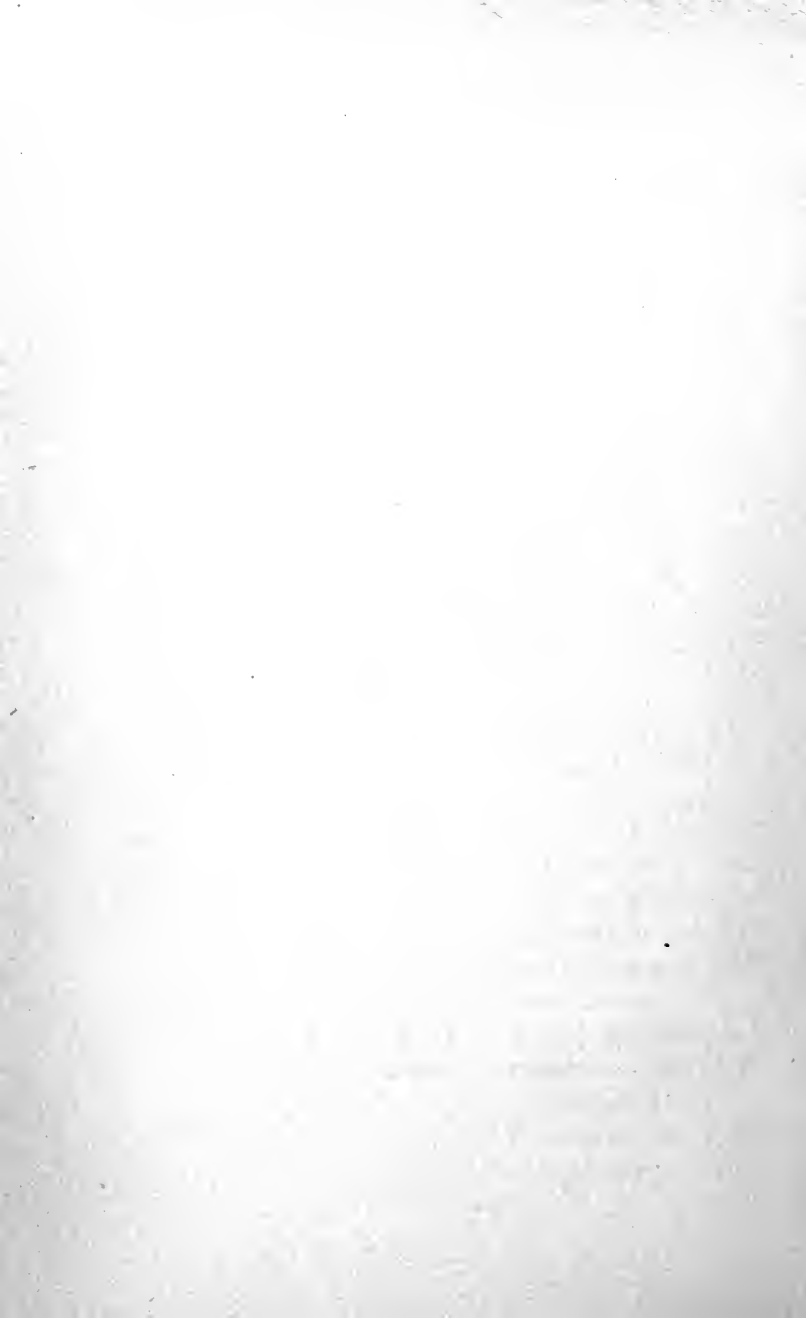
* November 1, 1879, p. 555. Extracts from this review are printed in "Views and Reviews," First Series, 1890.

Preface

"The Age of Shakespeare," and immediately preceded Meredith to join the band of the immortals.

From the nature of the present compilation it necessarily happens that the pleasant duty of acknowledging obligations extends to a considerable number of friends and correspondents. It will perhaps suffice to name specifically those who have done me the courtesy to accede to my request for authority to reprint the several papers in which copyright still exists; and I accordingly thank heartily for this courtesy, Mr. W. M. Rossetti, Mr. Theodore Watts-Dunton as representative of the late Mr. Swinburne, Mr. Robert Singleton Garnett as his father's representative, Miss Elizabeth M. Roscoe and Mr. J. St. Loe Strachey in respect of the late Richard Holt Hutton's article, Mr. Bertram Dobell, Mr. William Reeves, and the Directors of Cope Brothers and Company, Limited, in regard to the essays of James Thomson ("B. V."), the editors of *The Times*, *The Saturday Review*, *The Morning Post*, *The Daily News*, and *The Academy*, and last, but not least, the proprietors of *The Athenæum*, without whose kind permission I must have omitted two papers which it seemed very desirable to include. To Mr. William Maxse Meredith, who has authorized me to reprint the poems by his father quoted in this volume, I have also to express my thanks.

MAURICE BUXTON FORMAN.



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POEMS : 1851

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I

WILLIAM MICHAEL ROSSETTI

ON

POEMS: 1851

[This article appeared in *The Critic*, vol. x, no. 255, pp. 539-540, November 15, 1851, initialled W. M. R.]

THE full poet is a thoroughly balanced compound of perception and intellect. By the first faculty he sees vividly, and feels to the inmost; by the second, he understands deeply and largely, and applies with a subtle searching breadth. The power of expression is a correlative of both; but it belongs more immediately to the first. Though Tennyson had not been the author *in posse* of "In Memoriam," he might equally have produced such perfect word-painting as we find in "Mariana"; but a want of that perception which constitutes the essence of the latter would have made the former more faint from first to last.

Of the perceptive poet we have had no other such complete example as Keats. It is the delight in what he sees, the sympathy with what he narrates, that endows him with his marvellous power of expression. To him everything was an opportunity.

William Michael Rossetti

Yet he saw nature and emotion as rather suggestive than typical ; as exciting the thoughts outwards, not leading them inwards. His poems have but little of the unconscious simile, (to be found so largely in those of Tennyson for instance), the implication in description of an inner essence and ulterior meaning. Keats portrays his object with keen, exquisite picturing, but which aims only at the phenomenal fact ; or else he makes use of the simile direct. His enthusiasm was less an inner fire than a visible lambent halo. He saw loveliness in nature, or found it the incentive to lovely thoughts. He rested in the effect. "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever."

Mr. Meredith seems to us a kind of limited Keats. He is scarcely a perceptive, but rather a seeing or sensuous poet. He does not love nature in a wide sense as Keats did ; but nature delights and appeals closely to him. In proportion, however, as his sympathies are less vivid, excitable, and diffusive, he concentrates them the more. He appropriates a section of nature, as it were ; and the love which he bears to it partakes more of affection. Viewing Mr. Meredith as a Keatsian, and allowing for (what we need not stop to assert) the entire superiority of the dead poet, we think it is in this point that the most essential phase of difference will be found between the two ; and it is one which, were the resemblance in other respects more marked and more unmixed than it is, would suffice to divide Mr. Meredith from the imitating class. The love of

on Poems : 1851

Keats for nature was not an *affectionate* love : it was minute, searching, and ardent, but hardly personal. He does not lose himself in nature, but contemplates her and utters her forth to the delight of all ages.* Indeed, if we read his record aright, he was not, either in thought or in feeling, a strongly affectionate man ; and the passion which ate into him at the last was a mania and infatuation, raging like disease, a symptom and a part of it. It is otherwise with Mr. Meredith. In his best moments he seems to sing because it comes naturally to him, and silence would be restraint, not through exuberance or inspiration, but in simple contentedness, or throbbing of heart. There is an amiable and engaging quality in the poems of Mr. Meredith, a human companionship and openness, which make the reader feel his friend.

But, perhaps, it is chiefly in the impressions of love that our new poet's likeness and unlikeness at once to the author of "Endymion" and "Lamia" are to be recognized. We are told that women felt pique at Keats for treating them in his verses scarcely otherwise than flowers or perfumes ; as beautifiers and the object of tender and pleasurable emotion,—a charm of life. They missed the language of individual love, dignified and equal. Nor was the quarrel without a cause ; but the reader will probably, at the first reading of the very charming,

* We hope it is superfluous to explain that, in what is here said of Keats, we seek only to discriminate, not to depreciate ; and that we love and reverence him as one of the most glorious of poets,—W. M. R.

William Michael Rossetti

melodious, and rhythmical poem which we proceed to quote, think us unfair in trying to fasten it on Mr. Meredith.

LOVE IN THE VALLEY.

- “ Under yonder beech-tree standing on the green sward,
Couch'd with her arms behind her little head,
Her knees folded up, and her tresses on her bosom,
Lies my young love sleeping in the shade.
Had I the heart to slide one arm beneath her !
Press her dreaming lips as her waist I folded slow,
Waking on the instant she could not but embrace me—
Ah ! would she hold me, and never let me go ?
- “ Shy as the squirrel, and wayward as the swallow ;
Swift as the swallow when athwart the western flood
Circling the surface he meets his mirror'd winglets,—
Is that dear one in her maiden bud.
Shy as the squirrel whose nest is in the pine tops ;
Gentle—ah ! that she were jealous as the dove !
Full of all the wildness of the woodland creatures,
Happy in herself is the maiden that I love !
- “ What can have taught her distrust of all I tell her ?
Can she truly doubt me when looking on my brows ?
Nature never teaches distrust of tender love-tales,
What can have taught her distrust of all my vows ?
No, she does not doubt me ! on a dewy eve-tide
Whispering together beneath the listening moon,
I pray'd till her cheek flush'd, implored till she faltered—
Fluttered to my bosom—ah ! to fly away so soon !
- “ When her mother tends her before the laughing mirror,
Tying up her laces, looping up her hair,

on Poems : 1851

Often she thinks—were this wild thing wedded,
I should have more love, and much less care.
When her mother tends her before the bashful mirror,
Loosening her laces, combing down her curls,
Often she thinks—were this wild thing wedded,
I should lose but one for so many boys and girls.

“Clambering roses peep into her chamber,
Jasmine and woodbine, breathe sweet, sweet,
White-necked swallows twittering of summer,
Fill her with balm and nested peace from head to feet.
Ah ! will the rose-bough see her lying lonely,
When the petals fall and fierce bloom is on the leaves ?
Will the Autumn garners see her still ungathered,
When the fickle swallows forsake the weeping eaves ?

“Comes a sudden question—should a strange hand pluck
her !
Oh ! what an anguish smites me at the thought,
Should some idle lordling bribe her mind with jewels !—
Can such beauty ever thus be bought ?
Sometimes the huntsmen prancing down the valley
Eye the village lasses, full of sprightly mirth ;
They see as I see, mine is the fairest !
Would she were older and could read my worth !

“Are there not sweet maidens if she still deny me ?
Show the bridal Heavens but one bright star ?
Wherefore thus then do I chase a shadow,
Clattering one note like a brown eve-jar ?
So I rhyme and reason till she darts before me—
Thro' the milky meadows from flower to flower she
flies,
Sunning her sweet palms to shade her dazzled eyelids
From the golden love that looks too eager in her eyes.

William Michael Rossetti

- “ When at dawn she wakens, and her fair face gazes
Out on the weather thro’ the window panes,
Beauteous she looks ! like a white water-lily
Bursting out of bud on the rippled river plains.
When from bed she rises clothed from neck to ankle
In her long nightgown, sweet as boughs of May,
Beauteous she looks ! like a tall garden lily
Pure from the night and perfect for the day !
- “ Happy, happy time, when the grey star twinkles
Over the fields all fresh with bloomy dew ;
When the cold-cheek’d dawn grows ruddy up the
twilight,
And the gold sun wakes, and weds her in the blue.
Then when my darling tempts the early breezes,
She the only star that dies not with the dark !
Powerless to speak all the ardour of my passion
I catch her little hand as we listen to the lark.
- “ Shall the birds in vain then valentine their sweethearts ?
Season after season tell a fruitless tale ;
Will not the virgin listen to their voices ?
Take the honey’d meaning, wear the bridal veil.
Fears she frosts of winter, fears she the bare branches ?
Waits she the garlands of spring for her dower ?
Is she a nightingale that will not be nested
Till the April woodland has built her bridal bower ?
- “ Then come merry April with all thy birds and beauties !
With thy crescent brows and thy flowery, showery glee ;
With thy budding leafage and fresh green pastures ;
And may thy lustrous crescent grow a honeymoon for
me !

Come merry month of the cuckoo and the violet !
Come weeping Loveliness in all thy blue delight !
Lo ! the nest is ready, let me not languish longer !
Bring her to my arms on the first May night."

Surely, it may be said, there is passion enough here, and of a sufficiently personal kind. True, indeed : this is not a devotion which sins through lukewarmth, and roams uncertain of an object. It will not fail to obtain an answer, through dubiousness of quest : and if it shocks at all, it shocks the delicacy, not the *amour-propre*. But its characteristics are, in fact, the same as those at which exception was taken in the case of Keats. The flame burns here, which there only played, darting its thin, quick tongue from point to point : but the difference is of concentration only. The impressionable is changed for the strongly impressed—the influence being similar. Here again the love, like our poet's love of nature, has the distinct tone of *affection*. It is purely and unaffectedly sensuous, and in its utterance as genuine a thing as can be. We hear a clear voice of nature, with no falsetto notes at all ; as spontaneous and intelligible as the wooing of a bird, and equally a matter of course.

The main quality of Mr. Meredith's poems is warmth—warmth of emotion, and, to a certain extent, of imagination, like the rich mantling blush on a beautiful face, or a breath glowing upon your cheek. That he is young will be as unmistakably apparent to the reader as to ourself ; on which score various shortcomings and crudities, not less than

William Michael Rossetti

some excess of this attribute, claim indulgence. The "Rape of Aurora," for example, is certainly too highly coloured; "Daphne" objectionably spun out, even if but in regard to length; and "Angelic Love" other than angelic. The following, against which this plea cannot be urged, is a graceful and fitting companion to "Love in the Valley."

SONG.

- " Under boughs of breathing May,
In the mild spring time I lay,
Lonely, for I had no love;
And the sweet birds all sang for pity,
Cuckoo, lark, and dove.
- " Tell me, cuckoo, then I cried,
Dare I woo and wed a bride?
I, like thee, have no home nest;
And the twin notes thus tuned their ditty,—
' Love can answer best.'
- " Nor warm dove with tender coo,
Have I thy soft voice to woo,
Even were a damsel by;
And the deep woodland croon'd its ditty,—
' Love her first and try.'
- " Nor have I, wild lark, thy wing,
That from bluest heaven can bring
Bliss, whatever fate befall;
And the sky lyrist trill'd this ditty,—
' Love will give thee all.'

on Poems : 1851

“So it chanced while June was young,
Wooing well with fervent song,
I had won a damsel coy ;
And the sweet birds that sang for pity,
Jubileed for joy.”

Our last quotation displays Mr. Meredith in one of his more exclusively descriptive pieces. But we may observe that, here too, the emotion is what most distinctly impresses itself, while the description proper, though not wanting in precision and minuteness, looms somewhat faintly.

SONG.

“The daisy now is out upon the green ;
And in the grassy lanes
The child of April rains,
The sweet fresh-hearted violet is smelt and lov'd unseen.

“Along the brooks and meads, the daffodil
Its yellow richness spreads,
And by the fountain heads
Of rivers, cowslips cluster round, and over every hill.

“The crocus and the primrose may have gone,
The snowdrop may be low,
But soon the purple glow
Of hyacinths will fill the copse, and lilies watch the dawn.

“And in the sweetness of the budding year,
The cuckoo's woodland call,
The skylark over all,
And then at eve, the nightingale is doubly sweet and dear.

William Michael Rossetti

"My soul is singing with the happy birds,
And all my human powers
Are blooming with the flowers,
My foot is on the fields and downs, among the flocks and
herds.

"Deep in the forest where the foliage droops,
I wander, fill'd with joy!
Again as when a boy,
The sunny vistas tempt me on with dim delicious hopes.

"The sunny vistas, dim with hanging shade,
And old romantic haze :—
Again as in past days,
The Spirit of immortal spring doth every sense pervade.

"Oh! do not say that this will ever cease ;—
This joy of woods and fields,
This youth that nature yields,
Will never speak to me in vain, tho' soundly rapt in
peace."

We have assigned Mr. Meredith to the Keatsian school, believing that he pertains to it in virtue of the more intrinsic qualities of his mind, and of a simple enjoying nature ; and as being beyond doubt of the perceptive class in poetry. In mere style, however, he attaches himself rather to the poets of the day : the pieces in which a particular bias is most evident being in a Tennysonian mould—as the "Olive Branch," and the "Shipwreck of Idomeneus,"—while some of his smaller lyrics smack of Herrick. He has a good ear for melody, and considerable command of rhythm ; but he seems sometimes to hanker

unduly after novelty of metre, attaining it, if there be no other means to his hand, by some change in length or interruption of rhyme which has a dragging and inconsequent effect. That his volume is young is not its fault; nor are we by any means sure that it is its misfortune. Some jingle-pieces there are, indeed,—mere commonplace and current convention, which mature judgment would exclude: but the best are those whose spirit is the spirit of youth, and which are the fullest of it. We do not expect ever quite to enrol Mr. Meredith among the demigods or heroes; and we hesitate, for the reason just given, to say that we count on greater things from him; but we shall not cease to look for his renewed appearance with hope, and to hail it with extreme pleasure, so long as he may continue to produce poems equal to the best in this first volume.

II

CHARLES KINGSLEY

ON

POEMS: 1851

[This notice occurs in an article entitled "This Year's Song-Crop," which appeared in *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, vol. xlv., No. cclxiv., pp. 618-632, December, 1851. Mrs. Browning's "Casa Guidi Windows," "The Poems, Posthumous and Collected, of Thomas Lovell Beddoes," W. C. Roscoe's "Violenzia," and "Poetry, Sacred and Profane," by John Wright, were also reviewed in this article. The following extract comes between the section dealing with Beddoes's poems and that in which Kingsley invites his readers to laugh with him over Mr. Wright's book.]

QUITE antipodal to the poems of Mr. Beddoes, and yet, in our eyes, fresh proofs of the truth of those rules which we have tried to sketch, are the poems of Mr. George Meredith. This, we understand, is his first appearance in print; if it be so, there is very high promise in the unambitious little volume which he has sent forth as his first-fruits. It is something, to have written already some of the most delicious little love-poems which we have seen born in England in the last few years, reminding us by their richness and quaintness of tone of Herrick; yet with a depth of thought and feeling which Herrick never reached. Health and sweetness are two qualities which run

Charles Kingsley on Poems : 1851

through all these poems. They are often overloaded—often somewhat clumsy and ill-expressed—often wanting polish and finish ; but they are all genuine, all melodiously conceived, if not always melodiously executed. One often wishes, in reading the volume, that Mr. Meredith had been thinking now and then of Moore instead of Keats, and had kept for revision a great deal which he has published ; yet now and then form, as well as matter, is nearly perfect. For instance :—

SONG.

“ The moon is alone in the sky
As thou in my soul,
The sea takes her image to lie
Where the white ripples roll
All night in a dream,
With the light of her beam,
Hushedly, mournfully, mistily up to the shore,
The pebbles speak low,
In the ebb and the flow,
As I, when thy voice came at intervals, turned to adore :
Nought other is heard,
Save thy heart like a bird,
Beating to bliss that is past evermore, evermore.”

SONG.

“ I cannot lose thee for a day,
But like a bird with restless wing,
My heart will find thee far away,
And on thy bosom fall and sing,
My nest is here, my rest is here ;

Charles Kingsley

And in the lull of wind and rain,
Fresh voices make a sweet refrain,—
‘ His rest is there, his nest is there.’

“ With thee the wind and sky are fair,
But parted, both are strange and dark ;
And treacherous the quiet air
That holds me, singing like a lark,
O shield my love, strong arm above !
’Till in the hush of wind and rain,
Fresh voices make a rich refrain,—
‘ The arm above will shield thy love ! ’ ”

In Mr. Meredith’s Pastorals, too, there is a great deal of sweet wholesome writing, more like real pastorals than those of any young poet whom we have had for many a year. Let these suffice as specimens :—

“ . . . See, on the river the slow-rippled surface
Shining ; the slow ripple broadens in circles ; the bright
surface smoothen ;
Now it is flat as the leaves of the yet unseen water-lily.
There dart the lives of a day, ever varying tactics fantastic,
There, by the wet-mirror’d osiers, the emerald wing of the
kingfisher
Flashes, the fish in his beak ! there the dab-chick dived, and
the motion
Lazily undulates all thro’ the tall standing army of rushes.
O joy thus to revel all day, till the twilight turns us
homeward !
’Till all the lingering, deep-blooming splendour of sunset
is over,

on Poems : 1851

And the one star shines mildly in mellowing hues, like a spirit
Sent to assure us that light never dieth, tho' day is now buried."

Careless as hexameters ; but honest landscape-painting ; and only he who begins honestly ends greatly.

LOVE IN THE VALLEY.

"Under yonder beech-tree standing on the green sward,
Couch'd with her arms behind her little head,
Her knees folded up, and her tresses on her bosom,
Lies my young love sleeping in the shade.
Had I the heart to slide one arm beneath her !
Press her dreaming lips as her waist I folded slow,
Waking on the instant she could not but embrace me—
Ah ! would she hold me, and never let me go ?

"Shy as the squirrel, and wayward as the swallow ;
Swift as the swallow when athwart the western flood
Circleting the surface he meets his mirror'd winglets,—
Is that dear one in her maiden bud.
Shy as the squirrel whose nest is in the pine tops ;
Gentle—ah ! that she were jealous as the dove !
Full of all the wildness of the woodland creatures,
Happy in herself is the maiden that I love !

"When her mother tends her before the laughing mirror,
Tying up her laces, looping up her hair,
Often she thinks—were this wild thing wedded,
I should have more love, and much less care.
When her mother tends her before the bashful mirror,
Loosening her laces, combing down her curls,
Often she thinks—were this wild thing wedded,
I should lose but one for so many boys and girls."

Charles Kingsley

What gives us here hope for the future, as well as enjoyment on the spot, is, that these have evidently not been put together, but have grown of themselves; and the one idea has risen before his mind, and shaped itself into a song; not perfect in form, perhaps, but as far as it goes, healthful, and consistent, and living, through every branch and spray of detail. And this is the reason why Mr. Meredith has so soon acquired an instinctive melody, which Mr. Beddoes, as we saw, never could. To such a man, any light which he can gain from æsthetic science will be altogether useful. The living seed of a poem being in him, and certain to grow and develop somehow, the whole gardener's art may be successfully brought to bear on perfecting it. For this is the use of æsthetic science—to supply, not the bricklayer's trowel, but the hoe, which increases the fertility of the soil, and the pruning-knife, which lops off excrescences. For Mr. Meredith—with real kindness we say it, for the sake of those love-poems—has much to learn, and, as it seems to us, a spirit which can learn it; but still it must be learnt. One charming poem—for instance, "Daphne"—is all spoilt, for want of that same pruning-knife. We put aside the question whether a ballad form is suitable, not to the subject—for to that, as a case of purely objective action, it is suitable,—but to his half-Elegiac, thoughtful handling of it. Yet we recommend him to consider whether his way of looking at the Apollo and Daphne myth be not so far identical with Mr. Tennyson's idea of "Paris and Ænone," as

to require a similar Idyllic form, to give the thoughtful element its fair weight. If you treat external action merely (and in as far as you do so, you will really reproduce those old sensuous myths) you may keep the ballad form, and heap verse on verse as rapidly as you will; but if you introduce any subjective thought, after the fashion of the Roman and later Greek writers, to explain the myth, and give it a spiritual, or even merely allegoric meaning, you must, as they did, slacken the pace of your verse. Let Ovid's *Fasti* and *Epistles* be your examples, at least in form, and write slowly enough to allow the reader to think as he goes on. The neglect of this rule spoilt the two best poems in *Reverberations*, "Balder," and "Thor," which, whatever were the faults of the rest of the book, were true and noble poems; and the neglect of it spoils "Apollo and Daphne." Mr. Meredith is trying all through to mean more than the form which he has chosen allows him. That form gives free scope to a prodigality of objective description, of which Keats need not have been ashamed; but if he had more carefully studied the old models of that form—from the simple Scotch ballads to Shakspeare's "Venus and Adonis"—a ballad and not an idyl,—he would have avoided Keats' fault of too-muchness, into which he has fallen. Half the poem would bear cutting out; even half of those most fresh and living stanzas, where the whole woodland springs into life to stop Daphne's flight—where

“Running ivies, dark and lingering,
Round her light limbs drag and twine;

Charles Kingsley

Round her waist, with languorous tendrils
Reels and wreathes the juicy vine,
Crowning her with amorous clusters ;
Pouring down her sloping back
Fresh-born wines in glittering rillets,
Following her in crimson track."

Every stanza is a picture in itself, but there are too many of them ; and therefore we lose the story in the profusion of its accidentals. There is a truly Correggiesque tone of feeling and drawing all through this poem, which is very pleasant to us. But we pray Mr. Meredith to go to the National Gallery, and there look steadily and long, with all the analytic insight he can, at the "Venus and Mercury," or the "Agony in the Garden;" or go to the Egyptian Hall, and there feast, not only his eyes and heart, but his intellect and spirit also, with Lord Ward's duplicate of the "Magdalen"—the grandest Protestant sermon on "free justification by faith" ever yet preached ; and there see how Correggio can dare to indulge in his exquisite lusciousness of form, colour, and chiaro-'scuro, without his pictures ever becoming tawdry or overwrought—namely, by the severe scientific unity and harmonious gradation of parts which he so carefully preserves, which make his pictures single glorious rainbows of precious stone—that Magdalen one living emerald—instead of being, like the jewelled hawk in the Great Exhibition, every separate atom of it beautiful, yet as a whole utterly hideous.

One or two more little quarrels we have with Mr.

Meredith,—and yet they are but *amantium iræ*, after all. First, concerning certain Keatist words—such as languorous, and innumeros, and such like, which are very melodious, but do not, unfortunately, belong to this our English tongue, their places being occupied already by old and established words ; as Mr. Tennyson has conquered this fault in himself, Mr. Meredith must do the same. Next, concerning certain ambitious metres, sound and sweet, but not thoroughly worked out, as they should have been. Mr. Meredith must always keep in mind that the species of poetry which he has chosen is one which admits of nothing less than perfection. We may excuse the roughness of Mrs. Browning's utterance, for the sake of the grandeur and earnestness of her purpose ; she may be reasonably supposed to have been more engrossed with the matter than with the manner. But it is not so with the idyllist and lyrist. He is not driven to speak by a prophetic impulse ; he sings of pure will, and therefore he must sing perfectly, and take a hint from that microcosm, the hunting-field ; wherein if the hounds are running hard, it is no shame to any man to smash a gate instead of clearing it, and jump into a brook instead of over it. Forward he must get, by fair means if possible, if not, by foul. But if, like the idyllist, any gentleman "larks" his horse over supererogatory leaps at the coverside, he is not allowed to knock all four hoofs against the top bar ; but public opinion (who, donkey as she is, is a very shrewd old donkey, nevertheless, and clearly understands the difference

Charles Kingsley on Poems: 1851

between thistles and barley) requires him to "come up in good form, measure his distance exactly, take off neatly, clear it cleverly, and *come well into the next field.*" . . . And even so should idyllists with their metres.

THE SHAVING OF SHAGPAT



III
GEORGE ELIOT
ON
THE SHAVING OF SHAGPAT

[From *The Leader*, vol. vii., no. 302, January 5, 1856, pp. 15-17.]

NO art of religious symbolism has a deeper root in nature than that of turning with reverence towards the East. For almost all our good things—our most precious vegetables, our noblest animals, our loveliest flowers, our arts, our religious and philosophical ideas, our very nursery tales and romances, have travelled to us from the East. In an historical as well as in a physical sense, the East is the Land of the Morning. Perhaps the simple reason of this may be, that when the Earth first began to move on her axis her Asiatic side was towards the sun—her Eastern cheek first blushed under his rays. And so this priority of sunshine, like the first move in chess, gave the East the precedence, though not the pre-eminence, in all things; just as the garden slope that fronts the morning sun yields the earliest seedlings, though those seedlings may attain a hardier and more

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luxuriant growth by being transplanted. But we leave this question to wiser heads—

“Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas.”

(Excuse the novelty of the quotation.) We have not carried our reader's thoughts to the East that we may discuss the reason why we owe it so many good things, but that we may introduce him to a new pleasure, due, at least indirectly, to that elder region of the earth. We mean “The Shaving of Shagpat,” which is indeed an original fiction just produced in this western island, but which is so intensely Oriental in its conception and execution, that the author has done wisely to guard against the supposition of its being a translation, by prefixing the statement that it is derived from no Eastern source, but is altogether his own.

“The Shaving of Shagpat” is a work of genius, and of poetical genius. It has none of the tameness which belongs to mere imitations manufactured with servile effort, or thrown off with simious facility. It is no patchwork of borrowed incidents. Mr. Meredith has not simply imitated Arabian fictions, he has been inspired by them; he has used Oriental forms, but only as an Oriental genius would have used them who had been “to the manner born.” Goëthe, when he wrote an immortal work under the inspiration of Oriental studies, very properly called it “West-östliche”—West-eastern—because it was thoroughly Western in spirit, though Eastern in its forms. But this double epithet would not give a true idea of

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Mr. Meredith's work, for we do not remember that throughout our reading we were once struck by an incongruity between the thought and the form, once startled by the intrusion of the chill north into the land of the desert and the palm. Perhaps more lynx-eyed critics, and more learned Orientalists, than we, may detect discrepancies to which we are blind, but our experience will at least indicate what is likely to be the average impression. In one particular, indeed, Mr. Meredith differs widely from his models, but that difference is a high merit: it lies in the exquisite delicacy of his love incidents and love scenes. In every other characteristic—in exuberance of imagery, in picturesque wildness of incident, in significant humour, in aphoristic wisdom, "The Shaving of Shagpat" is a new Arabian Night. To two-thirds of the reading world this is sufficient recommendation.

According to Oriental custom the main story of the book—The Shaving of Shagpat—forms the setting to several minor tales, which are told, on pretexts more or less plausible, by the various *dramatis personæ*. We will not forestall the reader's pleasure by telling him who Shagpat was, or what were the wondrous adventures through which Shibli Bagarag, the wandering barber, became Master of the Event and the destroyer of illusions, by shaving from Shagpat the mysterious identical which had held men in subjection to him. There is plenty of deep meaning in the tale for those who cannot be satisfied without deep meanings, but there is no didactic thrusting forward of moral lessons, and our

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imagination is never chilled by a sense of allegorical intention predominating over poetic creation. Nothing can be more vivid and concrete than the narrative and description, nothing fresher and more vigorous than the imagery. Are we reading how horsemen pursued their journey? We are told that they "flourished their lances with cries, and jerked their heels into the flanks of their steeds, and stretched forward till their beards were mixed with the tossing manes, and the dust rose after them crimson in the sun." Is it a maiden's eyes we are to see? They are "dark, under a low arch of darker lashes, like stars on the skirts of storm." Sometimes the images are exquisitely poetical, as when Bhanavar looks forth "on the stars that were above the purple heights and the *blushes of inner heaven that streamed up the sky*;" sometimes ingenious and pithy; for example, "she clenched her hands an instant with that feeling which knocketh a nail in the coffin of a desire not dead." Indeed, one of the rarest charms of the book is the constant alternation of passion and wild imaginativeness with humour and pithy, practical sense. Mr. Meredith is very happy in his imitation of the lyrical fragments which the Eastern tale-tellers weave into their narrative, either for the sake of giving emphasis to their sententiousness, or for the sake of giving a more intense utterance to passion, a loftier tone to description. We will quote a specimen of the latter kind from the story of "Bhanavar the Beautiful." This story is the brightest gem among the minor tales, and perhaps in the whole book. It

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is admirably constructed and thoroughly poetic in its outline and texture.

“Bhanavar gazed on her beloved, and the bridal dew overflowed her underlids, and she loosed her hair to let it flow, part over her shoulders, part over his, and in sighs that were the measure of music she sang—

“ ‘ I thought not to love again !
But now I love as I loved not before ;
I love not : I adore !

O my beloved, kiss, kiss me ! waste thy kisses like a rain.

Are not thy red lips fain ?
Oh, and so softly they greet !
Am I not sweet ?

Sweet must I be for thee, or sweet in vain :

Sweet to thee only, my dear love !

The lamps and censers sink, but cannot cheat

Those eyes of thine that shoot above,

Trembling lustres of the dove !

A darkness drowns all lustres : still I see

Thee, my love, thee !

Thee, my glory of gold, from head to feet !

Oh, how the lids of the world close quite when our lips meet !’

“Almeryl strained her to him, and responded :—

“ ‘ My life was midnight on the mountain side ;

Cold stars were on the heights :

There, in my darkness, I had lived and died,

Content with little lights.

Sudden I saw the heavens flush with a beam,

And I ascended soon,

And evermore over mankind supreme

Stood silver in the moon.’

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“ And he fell playfully into a new metre, singing :—

“ ‘ Who will paint my beloved
In musical word or colour ?
Earth with an envy is moved :
Sea-shells and roses she brings,
Gems from the green ocean-springs,
Fruits with the fairy bloom-dews,
Feathers of Paradise hues,
Waters with jewel-bright falls,
Ore from the Genii-halls :
All in their splendour approved ;
All ; but, match'd with my beloved,
Darker, denser, and duller.’

“ Then she kissed him for that song, and sang :—

“ ‘ Once to be beautiful was my pride,
And I blush'd in love with my own bright brow.
Once, when a wooer was by my side,
I worship'd the object that had his vow :
Different, different, different now,
Different now is my beauty to me :
Different, different, different now !
For I prize it alone because prized by thee.’

“ Almeryl stretched his arm to the lattice, and drew it open, letting in the soft night wind, and the sound of the fountain and the bulbul and the beam of the stars, and versed to her in the languor of deep love :—

“ ‘ Whether we die or we live
Matters it now no more ;
Life has nought further to give :
Love is its crown and its core.
Come to us either, we're rife,—
Death or life !

on The Shaving of Shagpat

“ ‘ Death can take not away,
Darkness and light are the same :
We are beyond the pale ray,
Wrapt in a rosier flame ;
Welcome which will to our breath,—
Life or death ! ’ ”

An example of Mr. Meredith's skill in humorous apologue is the “Punishment of Khipil the Builder,” which is short enough to be quoted without much mutilation :—

“ They relate that Shahpesh, the Persian, commanded the building of a palace, and Khipil was his builder. The work lingered from the first year of the reign of Shahpesh even to his fourteenth. One day Shahpesh went to the river-side, where it stood, to inspect it. Khipil was sitting on a marble slab among the stones and blocks ; round him stretched lazily the masons and stonecutters and slaves of burden ; and they with the curve of humorous enjoyment on their lips, for he was reciting to them adventures, interspersed with anecdotes and recitations and poetic instances, as was his wont. They were like pleased flocks whom the shepherd hath led to a pasture freshened with brooks, there to feed indolently ; he, the shepherd, in the midst.

“ Now the King said to him, ‘ O Khipil, show me my palace where it standeth, for I desire to gratify my sight with its fairness.’

“ Khipil abased himself before Shahpesh, and answered, ‘ ’Tis even here, O King of the age, where thou delightest the earth with thy foot, and the ear of thy slave with sweetness. Surely a site of vantage, one that dominateth earth, air, and water, which is the builder's first and chief requisition for a noble palace, a palace to fill foreign kings and

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sultans with the distraction of envy ; and it is, O Sovereign of the time, a site, this site I have chosen, to occupy the tongues of travellers and awaken the flights of poets ! ’

“ Shahpesh smiled and said, ‘ The site is good ! I laud the site ! Likewise I laud the wisdom of Ebn Busrac, where he exclaims :—

“ ‘ Be sure, where Virtue faileth to appear,
For her a gorgeous mansion men will rear ;
And day and night her praises will be heard,
Where never yet she spake a single word.’

“ Then said he, ‘ O Khipil, my builder, there was once a farm-servant that, having neglected in the seed-time to sow, took to singing the richness of his soil when it was harvest, in proof of which he displayed the abundance of weeds that coloured the land everywhere. Discover to me now the completeness of my halls and apartments, I pray thee, O Khipil, and be the excellence of thy construction made visible to me.’

“ Quoth Khipil, ‘ To hear is to obey.’

“ He conducted Shahpesh among the unfinished saloons and imperfect courts and roofless rooms, and by half-erected obelisks, and columns pierced and chipped, of the palace of his building. And he was bewildered at the words spoken by Shahpesh ; but now the King exalted him, and admired the perfection of his craft, the greatness of his labour, the speediness of his construction, his assiduity, feigning not to behold his negligence.

“ Presently they went up winding balusters to a marble terrace, and the King said, ‘ Such is thy devotion and constancy to toil, O Khipil, that thou shalt walk before me here.’

“ He then commanded Khipil to precede him, and Khipil was heightened with the honour. When Khipil had

on The Shaving of Shagpat

paraded a short space he stopped quickly, and said to Shahpesh, 'Here is, as it chanceth, a gap, O King! and we can go no further this way.'

"Shahpesh said, 'All is perfect, and it is my will thou delay not to advance.'

"Khipil cried, 'The gap is wide, O mighty King, and manifest, and it is the one incomplete part of thy palace.'

"Then said Shahpesh, 'O Khipil, I see no distinction between one part and another; excellent are all parts in beauty and proportion, and there can be no part incomplete in this palace that occupieth the builder fourteen years in its building: so advance, and do my bidding.'

"Khipil yet hesitated, for the gap was of many strides, and at the bottom of the gap was a deep water, and he one that knew not the motion of swimming. But Shahpesh ordered his guard to point their arrows in the direction of Khipil, and Khipil stepped forth hurriedly, and fell into the gap, and was swallowed by the water below. When he rose the third time succour reached him, and he was drawn to land trembling, his teeth chattering.

"And Shahpesh praised him, and said, 'This is an apt contrivance for a bath, Khipil, O my builder! well conceived; one that taketh by surprise; and it shall be thy reward daily when much talking hath fatigued thee.'

"Then he bade Khipil lead him to the hall of state. And when they were there Shahpesh said, 'For a privilege, and as a mark of my approbation, I give thee permission to sit in the marble chair of yonder throne, even in my presence, O Khipil.'

"Khipil said, 'Surely, O King, the chair is not yet executed.'

"And Shahpesh exclaimed, 'If this be so, thou art but the length of thy measure on the ground, O talkative one!'

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“ Khipil said, ‘ Nay, ’tis not so, O King of splendours ! blind that I am ! yonder’s indeed the chair.’

“ And Khipil feared the King, and went to the place where the chair should be, and bent his body in a sitting posture, eyeing the King, and made pretence to sit in the chair of Shahpesh.

“ Then said Shahpesh, ‘ As a token that I approve thy execution of the chair, thou shalt be honoured by remaining seated in it one day and one night ; but move thou to the right or to the left, showing thy soul insensible of the honour done thee, transfixed shalt thou be with twenty arrows and five.’

“ The King then left him with a guard of twenty-five of his body-guard ; and they stood around him with bent bows, so that Khipil dared not move from his sitting posture. And the masons and the people crowded to see Khipil sitting on his master’s chair, for it became rumoured about. When they beheld him sitting upon nothing, and he trembling to stir for fear of the loosening of the arrows, they laughed so that they rolled upon the floor of the hall, and the echoes of laughter were a thousandfold. Surely the arrows of the guard swayed with the laughter that shook them.

“ Now, when the time had expired for his sitting in the chair, Shahpesh returned to him, and he was cramped, pitiable to see ; and Shahpesh said, ‘ Thou hast been exalted above men, O Khipil ! for that thou didst execute for thy master has been found fitting for thee.’

“ Then he bade Khipil lead the way to the noble gardens of dalliance and pleasure that he had planted and contrived. And Khipil went in that state described by the poet, when we go draggingly, with remonstrating members—

“ ‘ Knowing a dreadful strength behind
And a dark fate before.’

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"They came to the gardens, and behold, they were full of weeds and nettles, the fountains dry, no tree to be seen—a desert. And Shahpesh cried, 'This is indeed of admirable design, O Khipil! Feelest thou not the coolness of the fountains?—their refreshingness? Truly I am grateful to thee! And these flowers, pluck me now a handful, and tell me of their perfume.'

"Khipil plucked a handful of the nettles that were there in the place of flowers, and put his nose to them before Shahpesh till his nose was reddened; and desire to rub it waxed in him, and possessed him, and became a passion, so that he could scarce refrain from rubbing it even in the King's presence. And the King encouraged him to sniff and enjoy their fragrance, repeating the poet's words—

" 'Methinks I am a lover and a child,
A little child and happy lover, both!
When by the breath of flowers I am beguiled
From sense of pain, and lull'd in odorous sloth.
So I adore them, that no mistress sweet
Seems worthier of the love that they awake:
In innocence and beauty more complete,
Was never maiden cheek in morning lake.
Oh, while I live, surround me with fresh flowers!
Oh, when I die, then bury me in their bowers!'

"And the King said, 'What sayest thou, O my builder? that is a fair quotation, applicable to thy feelings, one that expresseth them?'

"Khipil answered, 'Tis eloquent, O great King! Comprehensiveness would be its portion, but that it alludeth not to the delight of chafing.'

"Then Shahpesh laughed, and cried, 'Chafe not! it is an ill thing and a hideous! This nosegay, O Khipil, is for

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thee to present to thy mistress. Truly she will receive thee well after its presentation! I will have it now sent in thy name, with word that thou followest quickly. And for thy nettled nose, surely if the whim seize thee that thou desirest its chafing, to thy neighbour is permitted what to thy hand is refused.'

"So the King set a guard upon Khipil to see that his orders were executed, and appointed a time for him to return to the gardens.

"At the hour indicated Khipil stood before Shahpesh again. He was pale, saddened; his tongue drooped like the tongue of a heavy bell, that when it soundeth giveth forth mournful sounds only: he had also the look of one battered with many beatings. So the King said, 'How of thy presentation of the flowers of thy culture, O Khipil?'

"He answered, 'Surely, O King, she received me with wrath, and I am shamed by her.'

"And the King said, 'How of my clemency in the matter of the chafing?'

"Khipil answered, 'O King of splendours! I made petition to my neighbours whom I met, accosting them civilly and with imploring, for I ached to chafe, and it was the very raging thirst of desire to chafe that was mine, devouring intensity of eagerness for solace of chafing. And they chafed me, O King; yet not in those parts which throbbed for the chafing, but in those which abhorred it.'

"Then Shahpesh smiled and said, 'Tis certain that the magnanimity of monarchs is as the rain that falleth, the sun that shineth: and in this spot it fertilizeth richness; in that encourageth rankness. So art thou but a weed, O Khipil! and my grace is thy chastisement.'

We hope we have said, if not enough to do justice

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to "The Shaving of Shagpat," enough to make our readers desire to see it. They will find it, compared with the other fictions which the season has provided, to use its own Oriental style, "as the apple-tree among the trees of the wood."

IV
GEORGE ELIOT
ON
THE SHAVING OF SHAGPAT

[The following short extract is taken from "Art and Belles Lettres" in *The Westminster Review* (vol. lxx., No. cxviii.), New Series, vol. ix., No. ii., pp. 625-650, April, 1856, an article which also contained among many short notices reviews of the third volume of Ruskin's "Modern Painters," Wilkie Collins's "After Dark," and Kingsley's "The Heroes," and a reference to and quotation from Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass." "The Shaving of Shagpat" passage occurs on pp. 638-639.]

WE turn from the art which most of us must leave our homes to get even a glimpse of, to that which has at least the advantage of visiting us at our own firesides—the art of the romancer and the novelist; and the first work of fiction that presents itself as worth notice is "The Shaving of Shagpat," an admirable imitation of Oriental tale-telling, which has given us far more pleasure than we remember to have had even in younger days from reading "Vathek"—the object of Byron's enthusiastic praise. Of course the great mass of fictions are imitations more or less slavish and mechanical—imitations of Scott, of Balzac, of Dickens, of Currer Bell, and the rest of the real "makers"; every great master has his school of

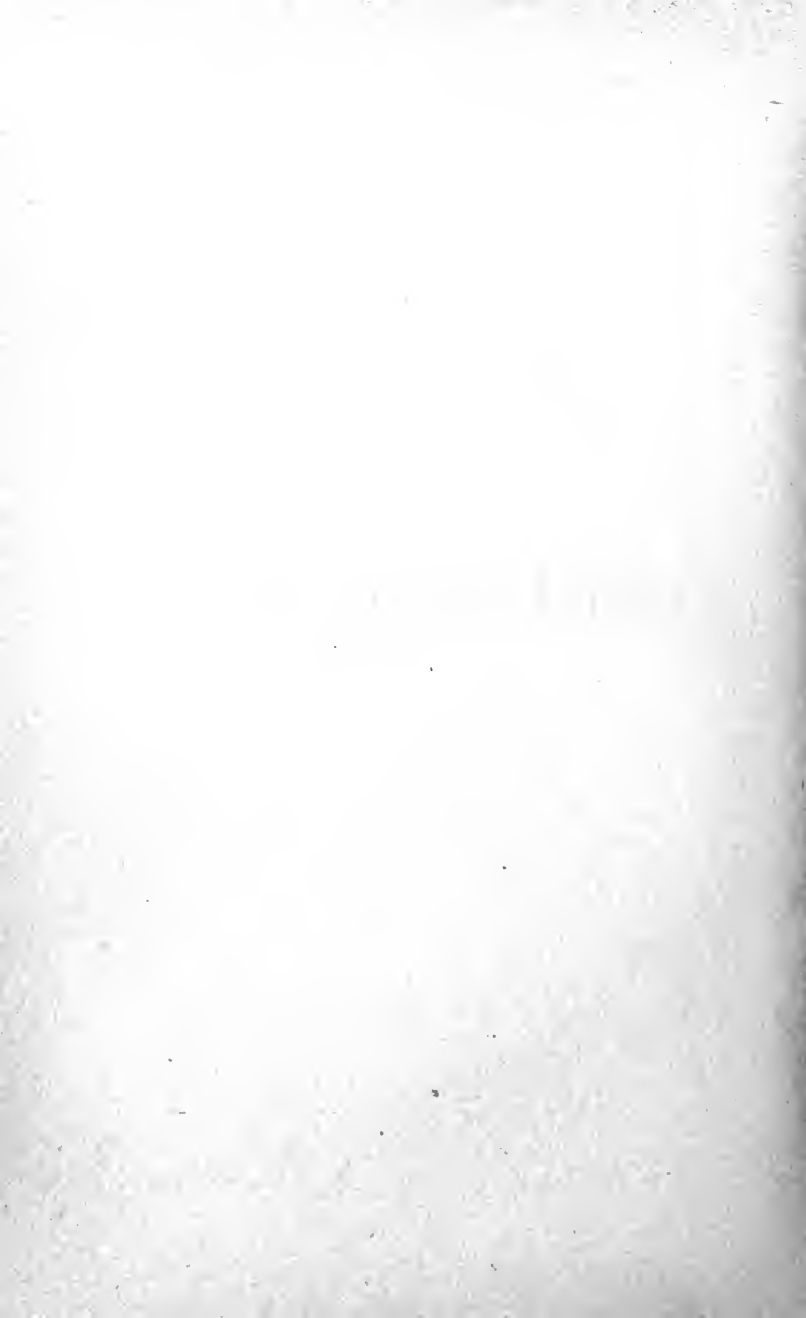
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followers, from the kindred genius down to the feeble copyist. "The Shaving of Shagpat" is distinguished from the common run of fictions, not in being an imitation, but in the fact that its model has been chosen from no incidental prompting, from no wish to suit the popular mood, but from genuine love and mental affinity. Perhaps we ought to say that it is less an imitation of the "Arabian Nights" than a similar creation inspired by a thorough and admiring study. No doubt, if a critical lens were to be applied, there would be found plenty of indications that the writer was born in Western Europe, and in the nineteenth century, and that his Oriental imagery is got by hearsay; but to people more bent on enjoying what they read than on proving their acumen, "The Shaving of Shagpat" will be the thousand and *second* night which they perhaps longed for in their childhood. The author is alive to every element in his models; he reproduces their humour and practical sense as well as their wild imaginativeness. Shibli Bagarag, the barber, carries a great destiny within him: he is to shave Shagpat the clothier, and thus to become Master of the Event. The city of Shagpat, unlike the city of London, regards shaving, and not the beard, as the innovation; and Shagpat is a "miracle of hairiness, black with hair as he had been muzzled with it, and his head, as it were, a berry in a huge bush by reason of it," and when the countenance of Shagpat waxed fiery it was as "a flame kindled by travellers at night in a bramble bush, and he ruffled and heaved, and was as when

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dense jungle-growths are stirred violently by the near approach of a wild animal." Moreover, among the myriad hairs of Shagpat is the mysterious "Identical," which somehow holds the superstition of men in bondage, so that they bow to it without knowing why—the most obstinate of all bowing, as we are aware. Hence he who will shave Shagpat, and deliver men from worshipping his hairy mightiness, will deserve to be called Master of the Event; and the story of all the adventures through which Shibli Bagarag went before he achieved this great work—the thwackings he endured, the wondrous scenes he beheld, and the dangers he braved to possess himself of the magic horse Garaveen, the Lily of the Enchanted Sea, and other indispensable things, with his hairbreadth escapes from spiteful genii—all this forms the main action of the book. Other tales are introduced, serving as pleasant landing places on the way. The best of these is the story of Khipil the Builder, a humorous apologue, which will please readers who are unable to enjoy the wilder imaginativeness of Oriental fiction; but lovers of the poetical will prefer the story of Bhanavar the Beautiful. We confess to having felt rather a languishing interest towards the end of the work; the details of the action became too complicated, and our imagination was rather wearied in following them. But where is the writer whose wing is as strong at the end of his flight as at the beginning? Even Shakespeare flags under the artificial necessities of a *dénouement*.

FARINA: A LEGEND OF
COLOGNE



V

GEORGE ELIOT

ON

FARINA

[This review forms part of the article on "Belles Lettres and Art" in *The Westminster Review* (vol. lxxiii., No. cxxxiv.), New Series, vol. xii., No. ii., October, 1851, pp. 585-604. Alexander Smith's "City Poems," Moxon's edition of Tennyson's "Poems," illustrated by Millais, Rossetti, Holman Hunt, and others, "The Elements of Drawing," by John Ruskin, Anthony Trollope's "Barchester Towers," and Flaubert's "Madame Bovary," were, with a number of other books, treated in this article. The following passage appears on pp. 597-599.]

THE author of "Farina" has exposed himself to a somewhat trying ordeal. Last year he treated us to a delightful volume of well-sustained Oriental extravagance, and we remember our friend Shibli Bagarag too well to be easily satisfied with any hero less astonishing. It was refreshing to leave the actual and the probable for a time, and follow Mr. Meredith's lead into the bright world of imagination. The hope of such another enchanted holiday prepared us to welcome his new tale with all due honour and cordiality. It was with something like disappointment, therefore, that we found ourselves brought down to the vulgar limits of time and place, and our

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appetite for the marvellous entirely spoilt by scenes which challenge prosaic considerations of historical truth and the fitness of things. The title, "Farina: a Legend of Cologne," will naturally carry the reader's mind to those ungainly-shaped bottles, with which the British tourist is sure to return laden from the city of evil smells. Mr. Meredith is pleased to bestow a high antiquity on the famous distillation, and his hero, doubtless the first of all the Jean Maries, is invested with the dubious honours of a dealer in the black art, on account of his suspicious collection of bottles and vases, pipes and cylinders. But when the Devil is beaten in single combat on the Drachenfels, and returns from whence he came, entering to his kingdom under the Cathedral Square, and leaving behind him a most abominable stench, Farina's perfumed water does good service. The Kaiser, six times driven back by the offence to his nostrils, is enabled to enter the good city of Cologne, and then and there reward the restorer of a pure atmosphere with the hand of his long-loved bride. For the rest, the story is sufficiently slight. We have the blonde and bewitching heroine, Margarita, and her troop of lovers, who prove their devotion by such strenuous interchange of blows in her honour, that there is not one of them who is not black and blue; and we have *the* lover, Farina, tender and true, brave as Siegfried, and worshipping his "Frankinne" with such fanatical homage as "Conrad the Pious" might have sung. Margarita's father, Gottlieb Groschen, the rich Cologne citizen, is a characteristic

on Farina

specimen of the prosperous mediæval Rhinelander, and we cannot give our readers a more favourable specimen of Mr. Meredith's style than by introducing the father and daughter, engaged in receiving that nuisance of the middle—as of all ages—morning visitors :—

“ A clatter in the Cathedral Square brought Gottlieb on his legs to the window. It was a company of horsemen sparkling in harness. One trumpeter rode on the side of the troop, and in front a standard-bearer, matted down the chest with ochre beard, displayed aloft to the good citizens of Cologne, three brown hawks, with birds in their beaks, on an azure star-dotted field. ‘Holy Cross!’ exclaimed Gottlieb, low in his throat, ‘the arms of Werner! Where got he money to mount his men? Why, this is daring all Cologne in our very teeth! ’Fend that he visit me now! Ruin smokes in that ruffian’s track. I’ve felt hot and cold by turns all day.’ The horsemen came jingling carelessly along the street in scattered twos and threes, laughing together, and singling out the maidens at the gable-shadowed window with hawking eyes. They were in truth ferocious-looking fellows. Leather, steel, and dust, clad them from head to foot; big and black as bears; wolf-eyed, fox-nosed. They glistened bravely in the falling beams of the sun, and Margarita thrust her fair braided yellow head a little forward over her father’s shoulder, to catch the whole length of the grim cavalcade. One of the troop was not long in discerning the young beauty.”

They come to the door with a “thundering smack,” and one is perforce admitted :—

“Margarita heard ‘wafted in a thunder of oaths,’ ‘’Tis the maiden we want; let’s salute her and begone! or cap

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your skull with something thicker than you've on it now, if you want a whole one, happy father!' 'Gottlieb von Groschen, I am,' answered her father, 'and the Kaiser——' 'Sas fond of a pretty girl as we are! Down with her, and no more drivelling! It's only for a moment, old Measure and Scales!' 'I tell you, rascals, I know your master, and if you're not punished for this, may I die a beggar!' exclaimed Gottlieb, jumping with rage. 'May you die as rich as an abbot! And so you will, if you don't bring her down, for I've sworn to see her, there's the end of it, man!'"

Fearing violence to her father, Margarita comes down; her brutal admirer explains:—

"'I'm no ninny, and not to be diddled; I'll talk to the young lady! Silence out there! all's going proper;' this to his comrades through the door. 'So, my beautiful maiden! thus it stands. We saw you at the window, looking like a fresh rose with a gold crown on. . . . 'Schwartz Thier!' says Henker Rothhals to me, 'I'll wager you odds you don't have a kiss of that fine girl within twenty minutes counting from the hard smack!' 'Done,' was my word, and we clapped our fists together. Now, you see, that's straightforward!'"

How Margarita escapes this indignity, how she becomes the captive of the terrible Werner himself, and how she is rescued, we have not space to tell; much clever and vigorous description is to be found in the narrative, and Mr. Meredith has been very successful in setting before us a vivid picture of the coarse, rough manners, the fierce, warlike habits, and the deep-seated superstition of the "good old times"

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of chivalry. The character of the jovial Squire Guy the Goshawk, is especially well done. As a whole, we think "Farina" lacks completeness, and the ghostly element is not well worked in. The combat between Saint Gregory and the Devil is made ludicrous by its circumstantiality. It was not as a jeering satirist that the old monkish legends set forth Sathanas, and there is a clumsiness in the whole affair which accords ill with the boldness and skill displayed in other portions of the tale. We must also protest against Father Gregory's use of the nominative case "ye" instead of the accusative "you," monk though he be, and privileged doubtless to speak bad grammar at will; nor can we admire many passages, in which the author has sacrificed euphony, and almost sense, to novelty and force of expression. With these blemishes, "Farina" is both an original and an entertaining book, and will be read with pleasure by all who prefer a lively, spirited story to those dull analyses of dull experiences in which the present school of fiction abounds.



THE ORDEAL OF RICHARD
FEVEREL



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ON
THE ORDEAL OF RICHARD FEVEREL

[From *The Times*, No. 23,437, October 14, 1859, p. 5.]

THE writer of an extraordinary novel must expect a more than ordinarily strict criticism. It is a compliment to him and a duty to the public. A compliment to him, because, notwithstanding his offences, he is treated with the attention due to a superior artist. A duty to the public, because, notwithstanding his effectiveness, it is requisite, for the sake of heedless or incompetent readers, to indicate, if we can, his artistic deficiencies. But there is unusual difficulty in performing a critic's duty upon this occasion. Mr. Meredith is an original writer, and his book is a powerful book, penetrative in its depth of insight, and rich in its variety of experience. But it is also very oracular and obscure in parts, and, as we conceive, extremely weak in the development of its main purpose. On the other hand, it is so crystalline and brilliant in its principal passages, there is such purity mingled with its laxness, such sound and firm truth in the midst of its fantastic

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subtleties, that we hesitate whether to approve or condemn ; and we have a difficulty even in forming a judgment on such strange contrarieties.

Let us premise that Mr. Meredith belongs to a class of fictionists who are more rare than welcome—more honoured than popular. There are two classes of novelists (apart from the simious tribe, who are mere meaningless imitators), and Mr. Meredith is of the *humourist* class, which draws its presentment of mankind in a large degree from its inner consciousness, while the other class paints life phenomenally, as the majority would see it. The distinction hardly holds, in an absolute sense, as separating rigidly the one class from the other ; but it is a distinction which applies more or less in every instance in which a fictionist is entitled to be characterised at all. The humourist draws more from his humour than from obvious facts—from his modes of thought than from the manners of his time. He spins his web, like the spider, out of his own bowels, instead of gathering his materials here and there and building them up like the ant. The opposite class, among whom are the Shakspeares and Scotts, are more expansive in their conceptions, and, concurrently, more dependent on externals for their means. The humourist—take even Rabelais, for example—is subjective, self-searching, self-evolved and sustained ; he is a stronger solvent of his secret pabulum, whatever that may be, and he hangs on the gauzy films of his own imagination. His task is obviously more arduous, for he relies so much on himself ; and his success is

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proportionate to the power which is in him. But his success is not a popular success, for it is personal and distinctive; nor can he be tried by popular tests which are the devices of the average mind. Now Mr. Meredith belongs to the latter class more exclusively than most novelists, and his characters are more entirely symbols and shadows of his thought than ordinary everyday denizens of the world about him. It would be unfair to try him by the standard relations of novels to life; for, as a humourist, he conceives humourists, and includes them in a world of his own shaping.

But it *is* fair and appropriate to try if his world holds together on its own principles, and, with this view, to question the plan and object of its creation. We are not certain that we fully understand its object in the present case, and this may be our fault. Is it, however, *really* our fault, or Mr. Meredith's, that we are not able to render his meaning with confidence? Is it not *his* fault that we should have to suggest the point as a question, and should fall back with some misgiving on our vague apprehensions?

As we conceive, the purport of Mr. Meredith's book is to explode the system of an offended humourist—one Sir Austin Feverel, a despiser of women, into whose disparagement of the gentler sex there enters a large measure of pique and of personal resentment, occasioned by the treachery and desertion of his wife. Having a son—one Richard Feverel—on his hands to educate, and for whom he

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entertains strong affection, nevertheless he gratifies his wrath at his wife by subjecting this boy to the ordeal of an educational system which is to render him forcibly a pattern of moral excellence. He deceives himself into believing that he acts as he does out of regard to his son ; for his pique leavens his theory, and eventually becomes its Nemesis. There is a vagueness, or rather a confusion, in Sir Austin's motives, which his system partakes, for its tendency and appliances are by no means transparent. Its gist, as applied to Sir Austin's educational crotchet, is this :—

“That a golden age, or something near it, might yet be established on our sphere, when fathers accepted their solemn responsibility, and studied human nature with a scientific eye, knowing what a high science it is to live ; and that, by hedging round the youth from corruptness, and at the same time promoting his animal health, by helping him to grow, as he would, like a tree of Eden ; by advancing him to a certain moral fortitude ere the Apple Disease was spontaneously developed, there would be seen something approaching to a perfect man, as the Baronet trusted to make this one son of his, after a recipe of his own.”

The Apple Disease, as it is quaintly termed, is the mutual affection of the sexes, supposed to have been generated in Paradise, as a consequence of our corrupted nature, and from this affection it is the endeavour of Sir Austin to preserve his son as long as possible, by training him on a Spartan nurture, with all the advantages of science. His design is

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only half approved by the relatives whom he hospitably houses, and who, according to their various temperaments and views, oppose or acquiesce in his design. His sister, Mrs. Doria, who has a daughter Clare, whom she destines for Richard, and who has "the far sight, the deep determination, the resolute perseverance of her sex, where a daughter is to be provided for, and a man overthrown," fixes herself at Raynham, Sir Austin's residence, with the deliberate intent to watch the system and sap it. But Richard is saved from becoming the shuttlecock of these contending influences by his indifference to his cousin Clare, who is, nevertheless, tenderly attached to him. He grows up with partial and dubious help from the system, a brave, strong-willed, high-minded boy, given to feats and pranks of unusual audacity, but with no premature symptoms of the Apple Disease, until Sir Austin shuts up the safety-valve of poetry to which he had become addicted, and precipitates a crisis:—

"When Nature has made us ripe for love, it seldom occurs that the fates are behindhand in furnishing a temple for the flame.

"Above green flashing plunges of a weir, and shaken by the thunder below, lilies, golden and white, were swaying at anchor among the reeds. Meadow-sweet hung from the banks thick with weed and trailing bramble, and there also hung a daughter of Earth. Her face was shaded by a broad straw hat, with a flexile brim that left her lips and chin in the sun, and, sometimes nodding, sent forth a light of promising eyes. Across her shoulders and behind flowed

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large, loose curls, brown in shadow, almost golden where the ray touched them. She was simply dressed, befitting decency and the season. On a closer inspection you might see that her lips were stained. This blooming young person was regaling on dewberries. They grew between the bank and the water. Apparently she found the fruit abundant, for her hand was making pretty progress to her mouth. Fastidious youth, which shudders and revolts at woman plumping her exquisite proportions on bread and butter, and would, we must suppose, joyfully have her quite scraggy to have her quite poetical, can hardly object to dewberries. Indeed, the act of eating them is dainty and induces musing. The dewberry is a sister to the lotos, and an innocent sister. You eat; mouth, eye, and hand are occupied, and the undrugged mind free to roam. And so it was with the little damsel who knelt there. The little skylark went up above her, all song, to the smooth southern cloud lying along the blue; from a dewy copse standing dark over her nodding hat, the blackbird fluted, calling to her with thrice mellow note; the kingfisher flashed emerald out of green osiers; a bow-winged heron travelled aloft, searching solitude; a boat slipped towards her, containing a dreamy youth, and still she plucked the fruit, and ate, and mused, as if no fairy prince were invading her territories, and as if she wished not for one, or knew not her wishes. Surrounded by the green shaven meadows, the pastoral summer buzz, the weir-fall's thundering white, amid the breath and beauty of wildflowers, she was a bit of lovely human life in a fair setting; a terrible attraction. The Magnetic Youth leaned round to note his proximity to the weir-piles, and beheld the sweet vision. Stiller and stiller grew nature, as at the meeting of two electric clouds. Her posture was so graceful that, though he was making straight for the weir, he dared not dip a scull. Just then one most enticing

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dewberry caught her eye. He was floating by unheeded, and saw that her hand stretched low, and could not gather what it sought. A stroke from his right brought him beside her. The damsel glanced up dismayed, and her whole shape trembled over the brink. Richard sprang from his boat into the water. Pressing a hand beneath her foot, which she had thrust against the crumbling wet sides of the bank to save herself, he enabled her to recover her balance, and gain safe earth, whither, emboldened by the incident, touching her finger's tip, he followed her."

The damsel is the niece of a neighbouring farmer, and the interview proceeds to its *dénouement* thus naturally in the manner of Ferdinand and Miranda, through a passage replete with freshness and vigour of no common order:—

"Richard, with his eyes still intently fixed on her, returned, 'You are very beautiful!'

"The words slipped out. Perfect simplicity is unconsciously audacious. Her overpowering beauty struck his heart, and, like an instrument that is touched and answers to the touch, he spoke.

"Miss Desborough made an effort to trifle with this terrible directness; but his eyes would not be gainsaid, and checked her lips. She turned away from them, her bosom a little rebellious. Praise so passionately spoken, and by one who has been a damsel's first dream, dreamed of nightly many long nights, and clothed in the virgin silver of her thoughts in bud, praise from him is coin the heart cannot reject if it would. She quickened her steps to the stile.

"'I have offended you,' said a mortally wounded voice across her shoulder.

"That he should think so were too dreadful.

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“‘Oh, no, no! you would never offend me.’ She gave him her whole sweet face.

“‘Then why? Why do you leave me?’

“‘Because,’ she hesitated, ‘I must go.’

“‘No? You must not go. Why must you go? Do not go.’

“‘Indeed, I must,’ she said, pulling at the obnoxious broad brim of her hat; and, interpreting a pause he made for his assent to her sensible resolve, shyly looking at him, she held her hand out and said, ‘Good-bye,’ as if it were a natural thing to say.

“The hand was pure white, white and fragrant as the frosted blossom of a May night. It was the hand whose shadow cast before he had last night bent his head reverentially above, and kissed, resigning himself thereupon over to execution for payment of the penalty of such daring; by such bliss well rewarded.

“He took the hand, and held it; gazing between her eyes.

“‘Good-bye,’ she said again, as frankly as she could, and at the same time slightly compressing her fingers on his in token of adieu. It was a signal for his to close firmly upon hers.

“‘You will not go?’

“‘Pray let me,’ she pleaded, her sweet brows suing in wrinkles.

“‘You will not go?’ Mechanically he drew the white hand nearer his thumping heart.

“‘I must,’ she faltered piteously.

“‘You will not go?’

“‘Oh yes! yes!’

“‘Tell me. Do you wish to go?’

“The question was subtle. A moment or two she did not answer, and then forswore herself, and said, ‘Yes.’

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“‘Do you ; do you wish to go?’ He looked with quivering eyelids under hers.

“A fainter ‘Yes,’ responded to his passionate repetition.

“‘You wish ; wish to leave me?’ His breath went with the words.

“‘Indeed, I must.’

“Her hand became a closer prisoner.

“All at once an alarming, delicious shudder went through her frame. From him to her it coursed, and back from her to him. Forward and back Love’s electric messenger rushed from heart to heart, knocking at each, till it surged tumultuously against the bars of its prison crying out for its mate. They stood trembling in unison—a lovely couple under these fair heavens of the morning.

“When he could get his voice it was, ‘Will you go?’

“But she had none to reply with, and could only mutely bend upward her gentle wrist.

“‘Then, farewell,’ he said, and dropping his lips to the soft, fair hand, kissed it and hung his head, swinging away from her ready for death.

“Strange that now she was released she should linger by him. Strange that his audacity, instead of the executioner, brought blushes and timid tenderness to his side, and the sweet words, ‘You are not angry with me?’

“‘With you, O beloved?’ cried his soul. ‘And you forgive me, Fair Charity!’

“She repeated her words in deeper sweetness to his bewildered look ; and he, inexperienced, possessed by her, almost lifeless with the divine new emotions she had realised in him, could only sigh, and gaze at her wonderingly.

“‘I think it was rude of me to go without thanking you again,’ she said, and again proffered her hand.

“The sweet heaven-bird shivered out his song above him. The gracious glory of Heaven fell upon his soul.

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He touched her hand, not moving his eyes from her, nor speaking, and she, with a soft word of farewell, passed across the stile and up the pathway through the dewy shades of the copse, and out of the arch of the light, away from his eyes.

"And away with her went the wild enchantment; he looked on barren air. But it was no more the world of yesterday. The marvellous splendours had sown seeds in him, ready to spring up and bloom at her gaze; and in his bosom now the vivid conjuration of her tones, her face, her shape, makes them leap and illumine him like fitful summer lightnings—ghosts of the vanished sun.

"There was nothing to tell him that he had been making love and declaring it with extraordinary rapidity; nor did he know it. Soft-flushed cheeks! sweet mouth! strange, sweet brows! eyes of softest fire! how could his ripe eyes see you and not plead to keep you? Nay, how could he let you go? And he seriously asks himself that question.

"To-morrow this spot will have a memory; the river, and the meadow, and the white, falling weir; his heart will build a temple here; and the skylark will be its high-priest, and the old blackbird its glossy gowned chorister, and there will be a sacred repast of dewberries. To-day the grass is grass; his heart is chased by phantoms, and finds rest nowhere. Only when the most tender freshness of his flower comes across him does he taste a moment's calm; and no sooner does it come than it gives place to keen pangs of fear that she may not be his for ever."

As the above description augurs, the System is likely to succeed through the boy's luck in finding a pure and charming object for his first affections. But his father is bent on looking out a suitable bride for his son, according to *his* notions of the requisites of

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a mate worthy of his pure-blood barb. And though in the mean time the Fairy Prince has himself discovered the Princess, the envious fates keep Cinderella out of the father's sight, until the latter hears of the spontaneous attachment through a cynical relative, and determines to break off what he considers the boy's foolish *liaison*. Thereupon Richard is summoned to town and kept out of the way of his betrothed till she can be secluded from his search by arrangement with her parents. When he is allowed to return to Raynham, Lucy has disappeared, and the thwarted passion of the boy throws him into a brain fever. The scientific humanist beholds his son prostrate, "forgetful even of love,—a drowned weed borne onward by the tide of the hours ;" and prays over him without remorse, supporting his anxiety by his unbounded faith in the physical energy he attributes to the System.

"This providential stroke had saved the youth from Heaven knew what! 'Mark!' said the baronet to Lady Blandish, 'when he recovers, he will not care for her.'

"The lady had accompanied him to the Bellingham Inn on first hearing of Richard's seizure.

"'Oh! what an iron man you can be,' she exclaimed, smothering her intuitions. She was for giving the boy his bauble; promising it him, at least, if he would only get well and be the bright flower of promise he once was.

"'Can you look on him,' she pleaded, 'can you look on him, and persevere?'

"It was a hard sight for this man who loved his son so deeply. The youth lay in his strange bed, straight and motionless, with fever on his cheeks, and altered eyes.

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“ ‘See what you do to us!’ said the baronet, sorrowfully eyeing the bed.

“ ‘But if you lose him?’ Lady Blandish whispered.

“ Sir Austin walked away from her, and probed the depths of his love. ‘The stroke will not be dealt by me,’ he said.

“ His patient serenity was a wonder to all who knew him. Indeed, to have doubted and faltered now was to have subverted the glorious fabric just on the verge of completion. He believed that his son’s pure strength was fitted to cope with any natural evil; that such was God’s law. To him Richard’s passion was an ill, incident to the ripeness of his years and his perfect innocence, and this crisis the struggle of the poison passing out of him—not to be deplored. He was so confident that he did not even send for Dr. Bairam. Old Dr. Clifford, of Lobourne, was the medical attendant, who, with head-shaking and gathering of lips, and reminiscences of ancient arguments, guaranteed to do all that leech could do in the matter. The old doctor did admit that Richard’s constitution was admirable, and answered to his prescriptions like a piano to the musician. ‘But,’ he said, at a family consultation, for Sir Austin had told him how it stood with the young man, ‘drugs are not much in cases of this sort. Change! That’s what’s wanted, and as soon as may be. Distraction! He ought to see the world, and know what he’s made of. It’s no use my talking, I know,’ added the doctor.

“ ‘On the contrary,’ said Sir Austin, ‘I am quite of your persuasion. And the world he shall see—now.’

* * * * *

“ When the young experiment again knew the hours that rolled him onward, he was in his own room at Raynham. Nothing had changed: only a strong fist had knocked him down and stunned him, and he opened his eyes to a

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gray world. He had forgotten what he lived for. He was weak, and thin, and with a pale memory of things. His functions were the same, everything surrounding him was the same; he looked upon the old blue hills, the far-lying fallows, the rivers, and the woods; he knew them, but they seemed to have lost recollection of him. Nor could he find in familiar human faces the secret of intimacy of heretofore. They were the same faces; they nodded and smiled to him. What was lost he could not tell. Something had been knocked out of him. He was sensible of his father's sweetness of manner, and he was grieved that he could not reply to it, for every sense of shame and reproach had strangely gone. He felt very useless. In place of the fiery love for one, he now bore about a cold charity to all.

"Thus in the heart of the young man died the spring primrose, and while it died another heart was pushing forth the primrose of autumn.

"The wonderful change in Richard, and the wisdom of her admirer, now positively proved, were exciting matters to Lady Blandish. She was rebuked for certain little rebellious fancies concerning him that had come across her enslaved mind from time to time. For was he not almost a prophet? It distressed the sentimental lady that a love like Richard's could pass off in mere smoke, and words such as she had heard him speak in Abbey-wood resolve to emptiness. Nay, it humiliated her personally, and the baronet's shrewd prognostication humiliated her. For how should he know, and dare to say, that love was a thing of the dust that could be trodden out under the heel of science? But he had said so, and he had proved himself right. She heard with wonderment that Richard of his own accord had spoken to his father of the folly he had been guilty of, and had begged his pardon. The baronet told her this, adding that the youth had done it in a cold unwavering way,

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without a movement of his features ; had evidently done it to throw off the burden of the duty he had conceived, and thereafter passed by."

But the baronet and Richard himself are deceived as to his state, as the event proves when the deception is exploded by a recurrence of opportunity, on Richard's appearance in town. Again he meets Lucy, and rushing to his goal in defiance of the System, he instantly carries her off, and with the assistance of some minor agents succeeds in marrying her. This stage of the hero's ordeal, while Lucy is secluded preparatory to her nuptials, is told with charming freshness and grace, and we conceive that here the author is most adroit and felicitous. But then comes the faulty remnant, which spoils an effective story by inconsequential proceedings on the part of both father and son. The father declines to receive his son's bride, and, without withdrawing his countenance, keeps out of the way of explanations, apparently aiming at some further probation of his pupil ; and the son, by misrepresentation of the fitting mode of propitiation, is induced to abandon his wife for a long interval, and to mortify his affections to do homage to his father. Worse than this, in an artistic sense, he is untrue to his own nature and to the passion which is represented as occupying him intensely ; for in the interval he is tempted by an enchantress of the *Demi-monde* ; and without a thought of love, in a paroxysm of sublime pity, he falls. Justly does Mr. Meredith exclaim at the conclusion of his brilliant incantation scene—"Was ever hero in this fashion

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won ?" for the winning of the hero under such circumstances revolts our notions of consistency, and drags us from the sphere of harmonious art into the chaos of caprice. It is a small compensation that these inconsistencies are the framework of powerful scenes, for they tend to no test of the System, *pro* or *con*, and they hurry us forward to a *dénouement* still more unsatisfactory. Thus, long after the baronet has been reconciled to his daughter-in-law, Richard is kept from returning to his wife by remorse. When he does return, recalled by the knowledge that in the mean time he has become a father, and his wife receives him with a tenderness reviving hope and confidence, a duel succeeds in which he is wounded, and the wife who has borne up against the agony of desertion, in possession of her child and anticipating a reunion with her husband, dies of cerebral excitement. Mr. Meredith thereupon turns round and accuses the System of murdering his heroine ; but for this unnecessary sacrifice of an innocent victim, unnecessary because at this stage in reference to the System it proves nothing, we take the liberty of accusing Mr. Meredith himself. His Lucy is exquisitely painted, her conduct throughout is admirable, she is the pure, gentle sufferer in the contest of father and son, and when the author owed her compensation, and just as we are expecting him to render it, she is hurried off the scene by a catastrophe in defiance of poetical justice. This is neither the ancient nor the true method. The poet who has to expiate the sins of a race may provide an innocent victim in deference

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to Nemesis, but even he rescues his Iphigenia at the critical moment, or, if he immolates his Antigone, it is to find the means of punishing her persecutor. Mr. Meredith's, on the contrary, is the pure wantonness of authorship, a barbarity like that for which Mr. Charles Dickens is so often answerable,—that of smothering innocents out of pure sentimentalism ; and if he does not, like Mr. Dickens, linger on the agonies of his victims, he deserves equally to be haunted by the ghost of his most beautiful creation.

Nor, as we said, does the world which Mr. Meredith has brought together as a test of the System otherwise answer its purpose. The System is not responsible for Richard's temptation and neglect of his wife ; for Richard's nature, as depicted, should at least have prevented this. He is represented as completely under the dominion of his instincts, yet he yields to contrary influences in the very conjuncture where instinct would have proved strongest and most certainly invincible. Nor is it the System which retains him in London ; but Mr. Meredith, who accomplishes the result at the expense of congruity and probability. The System is arraigned, but it is never tried fairly, its merits or demerits are unsolved to the last. It is not the System, but the luck of discovering a Lucy which makes Richard up to a certain point a satisfactory result. It is not the System, but Richard's inconsistency which undoes this result, and it is pure accident which at the last precipitates the catastrophe. The System is tried, but it can neither be acquitted or condemned on

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this evidence, and the verdict to be taken on Mr. Meredith's thesis is simply "not proven."

At the same time let us fairly acknowledge the striking merits of this imperfect book. Every touch in the picture of Clare is consistent and harmonious. In Lady Blandish, Sir Austin's semi-platonic friend, there are traits of feminine nature which evince deep penetration. Good old Mrs. Berry, the deserted wife, who promotes the union of the young couple, is a more arbitrary delineation, but touched with infinite humour. According to her own account of herself, she is "a widow and not a widow, and haven't got a name for what she is in any dixonary. I've looked, my dear, and"—she spread out her arms—"Johnson haven't got a name for me." Excellent is her advice to Lucy, "Mind me and mark me ; don't neglect your cookery. Kissing don't last, cookery do." By attention to this useful advice Lucy succeeds very naturally in conciliating the favour of Adrian Harley, the man of the world, Sir Austin's nephew and cool counsellor in ordinary. Adrian's character is thus skilfully elaborated, under the designation of the Wise Youth :—

"Adrian had an instinct for the majorities, and, as the world invariably found him enlisted in its ranks, his appellation of Wise Youth was generally acquiesced in.

"The Wise Youth, then, had the world with him, but no friends. Nor did he wish for these troublesome appendages of success. He caused himself to be required by people who could serve him ; feared by such as could injure. Not that he went out of the way to secure his end, or risked the expense of a plot. He did the work as

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easily as he ate his daily bread. Adrian was an Epicurean ; one whom Epicurus would have scourged out of his garden, certainly—an Epicurean of our modern notions. To satisfy his appetites without rashly staking his character was the Wise Youth's problem for life. He had no intimates, save Gibbon and Horace, and the society of these fine aristocrats of literature helped him to accept humanity as it had been, and was—a supreme ironic procession, with laughter of gods in the background. Why not laughter of mortals also? Adrian had his laugh in his comfortable corner. He possessed peculiar attributes of a heathen god. He was a disposer of men ; he was polished, luxurious, and happy at their cost. He lived in eminent self-content, as one lying on soft cloud lapt in sunshine. Nor Jove nor Apollo cast eye upon the maids of earth with cooler fire of selection, or pursued them in the covert with more sacred impunity. And he enjoyed his reputation for virtue as something additional. Stolen fruits are said to be sweet. Undeserved rewards are very exquisite.

“The best of it was that Adrian made no pretences. He did not solicit the favourable judgment of the world. Nature and he attempted no other concealment than the ordinary mask men wear. And yet the world would proclaim him moral as well as wise, and the pleasing converse every way of his disgraced cousin Austin. Adrian had a logical contempt for creatures who do things for mere show, as losing, he said, the core of enjoyment for the rind of respectability. The world might find itself in the wrong ; it would find him the same. His ambition, within the reserved limits, was to please himself, as being the best judge and the absolute gainer. Placed on Crusoe's Island, his first cry would have been for clean linen ; his next for the bill of fare ; and then for that Grand Panorama of the Mistress of the World falling to wreck under the barbarians,

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which had been the spur and the seal to his mind ; twittering Horace in Roman feast-attendant's tunic, twanging his lyre, might charm him to sleep, careless of the morrow, since the day was good.

"In a word, Adrian Harley had mastered his philosophy at the early age of one-and-twenty. Many would be glad to say the same at that age twice-told ; they carry in their breasts a burden with which Adrian's was not loaded. Mrs. Doria was nearly right about his heart. A singular mishap (at his birth, possibly, or before it) had unseated that organ, and shaken it down to his stomach, where it was a much lighter, nay, an inspiring, weight, and encouraged him merrily onward. Throned in that region, it looked on little that did not arrive to gratify it. Already that region was a trifle prominent in the person of the Wise Youth, and carried, as it were, the flag of his philosophical tenets in front of him. A fat Wise Youth, digesting well ; charming after dinner, with men or with women ; soft, dimpled, succulent-looking as a sucking-pig ; delightfully sarcastic ; perhaps a little too unscrupulous in his moral tone, but that his moral reputation belied him, and it must be set down to generosity of disposition.

"Such was the Adrian Harley, another of Sir Austin's intellectual favourites, chosen from mankind to superintend the education of his son at Raynham. Adrian had been destined for the Church. He did not enter into orders. He and the baronet had a conference together one day, and from that time Adrian became a fixture in the Abbey. His father, Mr. Justice Harley, died in his promising son's College term, bequeathing him nothing but his legal complexion, and Adrian became stipendiary officer in his uncle's household.

"The Wise Youth spread out his mind to the system like a piece of blank paper."

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Thus Mr. Meredith shoots at Adrian with the bow of Apollo, but the Wise Youth and the "Pilgrim's Scrip," an imaginary work of the baronet's, are none the less the chorus to his tragedy, and as obtrusive as any chorus of the Athenian stage.

One other word remains—this book has been charged with impurity, and tabooed, as we hear, in some quarters by the over-fastidious. It certainly touches a delicate theme, and includes some equivocal situations, but of impurity, in the sense of any corrupting tendency, we see not a trace, and we will not endorse the imputation. It is a novel, in short, which may be read by men and women with perfect impunity if they have no corrupt imagination of their own to pervert the pure purpose of the author.

VII

JAMES THOMSON

ON

THE ORDEAL OF RICHARD FEVEREL

[This article appeared in *Cope's Tobacco Plant*, vol. ii., No. 110, May, 1879, pp. 334-336, and is a review of the one volume edition of "Richard Feverel," published by Kegan Paul in 1878. It was entitled "An Old New Book," and signed "Sigvat."]

WHEN one finds a novel begin thus, he knows that he has to do with a thinker :—

"Some years ago a book was published under the title of 'The Pilgrim's Scrip.' It consisted of a selection of original aphorisms by an anonymous gentleman, who in this bashful manner gave a bruised heart to the world.

"He made no pretension to novelty. 'Our new thoughts have thrilled dead bosoms,' he wrote; by which avowal it may be seen that youth had manifestly gone from him, since he had ceased to be jealous of the ancients. There was a half-sigh floating through his pages for those days of intellectual coxcombry, when ideas come to us affecting the embraces of virgins, and swear to us they are ours alone, and no one else have they ever visited : and we believe them.

"For an example of his ideas of the sex, he said, 'I expect that Woman will be the last thing civilised by Man.'"

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The Pilgrim of the Scrip is the father, Sir Austin Feverel, Bart., of Raynham Abbey, in a certain western county folding Thames. He had a wife and a friend : the wife a poor beauty, too far beneath her husband in mental and moral stature ; the friend a dangling parasite, a sort of poet of sentiment and satire. After five years of marriage, and twelve of friendship, Sir Austin was left to his loneliness, with nothing to ease his heart of love upon save a little baby boy in a cradle. The baby is Richard, the subject of the Ordeal, which is the system of education elaborated by the father so incurably wounded in friendship and love :—

“ Richard was neither to go to school nor to college. Sir Austin considered that the schools were corrupt, and maintained that young lads might by parental vigilance be kept pretty secure from the Serpent until Eve sided with him : a period that might be deferred, he said.”

Again :—

“ Sir Austin wished to be Providence to his son. If immeasurable love were perfect wisdom, one human being might almost impersonate Providence to another. Alas ! love, divine as it is, can do no more than lighten the house it inhabits—must take its shape, sometimes intensify its narrowness—can spiritualise, but not expel, the old life-long lodgers above-stairs and below.”

Whence we apprehend that the infallible System may fail ; that in being the Ordeal of young Richard, it is passing through a fiery ordeal itself, from which

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it can scarcely emerge scatheless—from which it may not emerge at all, being utterly consumed. As for the faithless wife and friend, we have but the briefest glimpses of either ; one glimpse of both together is very truly sad :—

“Further behind the scenes we observe Rizzio and Mary grown older, much disenchanted : she discrowned, dishevelled—he with gouty fingers on a greasy guitar. The Diaper Sandoe of promise lends his pen for small hires. His fame has sunk ; his bodily girth has sensibly increased. What he can do, and will do, is still his theme ; meantime the juice of the juniper is in requisition, and it seems those small hires cannot be performed without it.”

Rizzio, if you like, Mr. Meredith, though surely a very mean one ; but wherefore this poor-spirited, weak-minded, soft-headed creature, Mary ? Mary, one of those few supreme women like Helen and Cleopatra, each to the common of her sex “as a royal Bengal tigress to a household cat ;” most beautiful, most terrible, haughty, and splendid and indomitable, fatal and fated ; transcending all our petty moral codes, triumphing disastrously in life and death, compelling reluctant History to bow down and adore.

Let us see how our author delineates a character, before setting it to act for itself. Here is Richard’s cousin and tutor :—

“The principal characteristic of Adrian Harley was his sagacity. He was essentially the wise youth, both in counsel and in action. ‘In action,’ the ‘Pilgrim’s Scrip’

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observes, 'Wisdom goes by majorities.'* Adrian had an instinct for the majorities, and as the world invariably found him enlisted in its ranks, his appellation of wise youth was acquiesced in without irony.

"The wise youth, then, had the world with him, but no friends. Nor did he wish for those troublesome appendages of success. He caused himself to be required by people who could serve him; feared by such as could injure. Not that he went out of the way to secure his end, or risked the expense of a plot. He did the work as easily as he ate his daily bread. Adrian was an epicurean: one whom Epicurus would have scourged out of his garden, certainly; an epicurean of our modern notions. To satisfy his appetites without rashly staking his character, was the wise youth's problem for life. He had no intimates except Gibbon and Horace, and the society of these fine aristocrats of literature helped him to accept humanity as it had been, and was; a supreme ironic procession, with laughter of gods in the background. Why not laughter of mortals also? Adrian had his laugh in his comfortable corner. He possessed peculiar attributes of a heathen god. He was a disposer of men: he was polished, luxurious, and happy—at their cost. He lived in eminent self-content, as one lying on soft cloud, lapt in sunshine. Nor Jove, nor Apollo, cast eye upon the maids of earth with cooler fire of selection, or pursued them in the covert with more sacred

* Compare Leopardi, "Pensieri," V.: "In things occult the minority always sees better; in plain things, the majority. It is absurd to adduce what is called the consensus of the multitude [Reid's "Common Sense"] in metaphysical questions; of which consensus no account is taken in physical matters, subject to the senses; as, for example, in the question of the motion of the earth, and in a thousand others. And, on the contrary, it is rash, dangerous, and in the long run useless, to oppose the opinion of the majority in civil affairs."
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impunity. And he enjoyed his reputation for virtue as something additional. Stolen fruits are said to be sweet; undeserved rewards are exquisite.

"The best of it was, that Adrian made no pretences. He did not solicit the favourable judgment of the world. Nature and he attempted no other concealment than the ordinary mask men wear. And yet the world would proclaim him moral, as well as wise.

"In a word, Adrian Harley had mastered his philosophy at the early age of one-and-twenty. Many would be glad to say the same at that age twice told; they carry in their breasts a burden with which Adrian's was not loaded. A singular mishap (at his birth, possibly, or before it) had unseated his heart, and shaken it down to his stomach, where it was a much lighter, nay, an inspiring, weight, and encouraged him merrily onward. Throned there it looked on little that did not arrive to gratify it. Already that region was a trifle prominent in the person of the wise youth, and carried, as it were, the flag of his philosophical tenets in front of him. He was charming, after dinner, with men or with women; delightfully sarcastic; perhaps a little unscrupulous in his moral tone, but that his moral reputation belied him, and it must be set down to generosity of disposition."

This from Chapter I., let us move on to II. and III.

"October shone royally on Richard's fourteenth birthday. The brown beech woods and golden birches glowed to a brilliant sun. Banks of moveless cloud hung about the horizon, mounded to the west, where slept the wind. Promise of a great day for Raynham, as it proved to be, though not in the manner marked out."

For the hero of the festival had been requested

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by his father to submit to medical examination, like a boor enlisting for a soldier, and with a reluctant friend of his own age was flying as though he would have flown from the shameful thought of what had been asked of him. His friend said his sentiments were those of a girl; for which offensive remark friend was called a fool when he fired badly, they having borrowed a couple of guns at the bailiff's farm. Hence a fight, in which poor friend's nose was damaged; then reconciliation, Richard, having the better of it, withdrawing the "fool." Unconsciously they got poaching on the demesne of the notorious free-trade Farmer Blaize, who loved not Feverels; and, after threats and defiance, soundly horsewhipped the youngsters. Richard goes on in a fever; with a horrible sense of shame, self-loathing, universal hatred, impotent vengeance, as if his spirit were steeped in abysmal blackness; meditating a thousand schemes of sweeping and consummate revenge. Something terrible must be done to wipe out the indignity; he would kill the farmer's cattle, he would kill the farmer; would make him fight with powder and ball, and shoot the brawny coward dead.—Truly the System seems in a rather bad way already.

The boys went on and on across country; the friend, less heroic, becoming more and more intensely conscious of weariness and famine.

"They were a long way down the valley, in a country of sour pools, yellow brooks, rank pasturage, desolate heath. Solitary cows were seen; the smoke of a mud-cottage;

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a cart filled with peat; a donkey grazing at leisure, oblivious of an unkind world; geese by a horse-pond, gabbling as in the first loneliness of creation; uncooked things that a famishing boy cannot possibly care for, and must despise."

At length, when friend in despair cried "Tell us where you're going to stop," Richard said "There!" and dropped down on a withered bank; and the poor friend, crushed as by remorseless fate, had to sink beside him. Thus are we brought to the grand duet to the glory of Divine Tobacco, chanted by the Travelling Tinker and the Ploughman out of work, which, with its accompaniment, must be here set out in full:—

"Now, the chance that works for certain purposes sent a smart shower from the sinking sun, and the wet sent two strangers for shelter in the lane behind the hedge where the boys reclined. One was a travelling tinker, who lit a pipe and spread a tawny umbrella. The other was a burly young countryman, pipeless and tentless. They saluted with a nod, and began recounting for each other's benefit the day-long doings of the weather, as it had affected their individual experience, and followed their prophecies. Both had anticipated and foretold a bit of rain before night, and therefore both welcomed the rain with satisfaction. A monotonous betweenwhiles kind of talk they kept droning, in harmony with the still hum of the air. From the weather theme they fell upon [*i.e.* rose to] the blessings of Tobacco; how it was the poor man's friend, his company, his consolation, his comfort, his refuge at night, his first thought in the morning.

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“‘Better than a wife!’ chuckled the tinker. ‘No curtain-lecturin’ with a pipe. Your pipe a’n’t a shrew.’

“‘That be it!’ the other chimed in. ‘Your pipe doan’t mak’ ye out wi’ all the cash Saturday evenin’.’

“‘Take one,’ said the tinker in the enthusiasm of the moment, handing a grimy short clay. Speed-the-Plough filled from the tinker’s pouch, and continued his praises.

“‘Penny a day, and there y’are, primed! Better than a wife? Ha, ha!’

“‘And ye can get rid of it, if ye wants for to, and when ye wants,’ added the tinker.

“‘So ye can!’ Speed-the-Plough took him up, ‘So ye can! And ye doan’t want for to. Leastways, t’other case. I means pipe.’

“‘And,’ continued the tinker, comprehending him perfectly, ‘it don’t bring repentance after it.’

“‘Not no how, master, it doan’t! And’—Speed-the-Plough cocked his eye—‘it doan’t eat up half the victuals, your pipe doan’t.’

“Here the honest yeoman gesticulated his keen sense of a clincher, which the tinker acknowledged; and having, so to speak, sealed up the subject by saying the best thing that could be said, the two smoked for some time in silence to the drip and patter of the shower.

“Ripton [Richard’s friend] solaced his wretchedness by watching them through the briar hedge. He saw the tinker stroking a white cat, and appealing to her, every now and then, as his missus, for an opinion or a confirmation; and he thought that a curious sight. Speed-the-Plough was stretched at full length, with his boots in the rain, and his head amidst the tinker’s pots, smoking profoundly contemplative. The minutes seemed to be taken up alternately by the grey puffs from their mouths.

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"It was the tinker who renewed the colloquy. Said he, 'Times is bad!'

"His companion assented, 'Sure-ly!'

"'But it somehow comes round right,' resumed the tinker. 'Why, look here. Where's the good o' moping? I sees it all come round right and tight. Now, I travels about. I've got my beat. 'Casion calls me t'other day to Newcastle!—Eh?'

"'Coals!' ejaculated Speed-the-Plough, sonorously.

"'Coals!' echoed the tinker. 'You ask what I goes there for, mayhap? Never you mind. One sees a most o' life in my trade. Not for coals it isn't. And I don't carry 'em there, neither. Anyhow, I comes back. London's my mark. Says I, I'll see a bit o' the sea, and steps aboard a collier. We were as nigh wrecked as the prophet Paul.'

"'A—who's him?' the other wished to know.

"'Read your Bible,' said the tinker. 'We pitched and tossed—'taint that game at sea, 'tis on land, I can tell ye! I thinks, down we're going.—Say your prayers, Bob Tiles! That was a night, to be sure! But God's above the devil, and here I am, ye see.'

"Speed-the-Plough lurched round on his elbow and regarded him indifferently. 'D'ye call that doctrin'? He bean't al'ays, or I shoo'n't be scrapin' my heels wi' nothin' to do, and what's worse, nothin' to eat. Why, look here. Luck's luck, and bad luck's the con-trary. Varmer Bollop, t'other day, has 's rick burnt down. Next night his gran'ry's burnt. What do he tak' and go and do? He takes and goes and hangs unsel', and turns us out of his employ. God warn't above the devil then, I thinks, or I can't make out the reckonin'.'

"The tinker cleared his throat, and said it was a bad case.

"'And a darn'd bad case. I'll tak' my oath on't!'

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cried Speed-the-Plough. 'Well, look heer. Here's another darn'd bad case. I threshed for Varmer Blaize—Blaize o' Beltharpe—afore I goes to Varmer Bollop. Varmer Blaize misses pilkins. He swears our chaps steals pilkins. 'Twarn't me steals 'em. What do *he* tak' and go and do? He takes and turns us off, me and another, neck and crop, we scuffle about and starve, for all *he* keers. God warn't above the devil then, I thinks. Not nohow, as I can see!'

"The tinker shook his head, and said, that was a bad case also.

"'And you can't mend it,' added Speed-the-Plough. 'It's bad, and there it be. But I'll tell ye what, master. Bad wants payin' for.' He nodded and winked mysteriously. 'Bad has its wages as well as honest work, I'm thinkin'. Varmer Bollop I don't owe no grudge to; Varmer Blaize I do. And I shud like to stick a Lucifer in his rick some dry windy night.' Speed-the-Plough screwed up an eye villainously. 'He wants hittin' in the wind,—jest where the pocket is, master, do Varmer Blaize, and he'll cry out O Lor'! Varmer Blaize will. You won't get the better o' Varmer Blaize by no means, as I makes out, if you doan't hit into him jest there.'

"The tinker sent a rapid succession of white clouds from his mouth, and said that would be taking the devil's side of a bad case. Speed-the-Plough observed energetically that, if Farmer Blaize was on the other, he should be on that side.

"There was a young gentleman close by who thought with him."

After this readers will scarcely be surprised to learn that that very night Farmer Blaize's rick and stable went to blazes, and that the hero and his friend, as well as the honest rustic, were concerned

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in the arson. What came of it and what befell the hero afterwards, voyaging the wild Sea of Life in the ironclad "System"; and how the poor "System" itself fared, buffeted by the winds and waves of human nature and worldly circumstance; all this I commend the good and thoughtful smoker to read and ponder for himself in the book itself, one of the most brilliant and daring of our generation. I may just hint that George Meredith appears to have about as much esteem for the "System" as Carlyle for Logic-spectacles and paper Constitutions. For he, too, is a spiritual Idealist who fights resolutely for the veracious Real; he affirms himself as emphatically as Fielding, no mere fiction-monger, but an authentic historian of genuine Nature, infinitely more noble and beautiful in her honest plainness than when tricked out and disguised in the most dazzling gauds of sentimental and other artificialities. And the purport of this "History of Father and Son" may be concisely stated in a sentence I have read somewhere: "A Creed or System is a strait-waistcoat for Nature; and if you will persist in forcing it upon her, you will soon experience that the great Titaness not only flings it off with wrathful disdain, but makes yourself fit for a strait-waistcoat in recompense for your trouble."

One of the unfair and inferior sex has this to give him evil courage in writing for the *Tobacco Plant*, that he will be mainly read by mere men like himself. But should any of the fair and superior sex deign a casual glance at the foregoing excerpts, and

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protest against the male arrogance of that "Woman will be the last thing civilised by Man"; and against the characteristic selfishness and injustice of that preference, wherein Tinker and Ploughman so cordially agree, of a cheap pipe to a dear wife: allow me, by way of propitiation, to inform these "Fair Ladies in Revolt" (of whom our poet has written an exquisitely subtle and chivalrous ballad), that a certain little Lucy, most divinely human, glows glorious in the book; that between her and Richard there is some of the most beautiful, simple, warm, frank love-making ever met with in drama or romance; and that there is a great deal of the remarkable sayings and doings of a certain Mrs. Berry, their humble friend, one of the delightfulest bunches of black satin that ever rustled through printed pages.

Having thus, I hope, made peace for my author and myself with the ladies, I fall back upon my own sex; for George Meredith is distinctly rather a man's than a woman's writer. He has the broad, jolly humour, full-blooded with beef and beer, of great Fielding, as well as his swift, keen insight; he has the quaint fantastic ironical humour of the poet and scholar and thinker—freakish touches of Sterne and Jean Paul and Carlyle and his own father-in-law (Peacock, of "Nightmare Abbey," "Gryll Grange," "Headlong Hall," and other enjoyable sojourning places, who had Shelley for a friend). In brief, he is humoristic and ironical; and women in general care for no humour save of the nursery, distrust and dislike all irony except in talking with and about one

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another. But men will savour in that dialogue of Tinker and Ploughman the fine open-air wayside relish in which our robust old plays and novels are so rich, in which most of our modern are so poor. George Borrow, George Eliot, George Meredith, can reproduce for us this pithy, vulgar talk, succulent with honest nature and bookless mother wit; but how many else can furnish it unadulterated? I have named our most popular, and justly popular, great novelist along with him who is one of the least popular; and to my mind he is throned not less eminent than she; and if certain jewels in her crown are lacking in his, he has others not less precious that are wanting in hers.

As his works are still so little known, while so worthy of being known to all competent readers, it may be well to take the opportunity of just mentioning them here. "Men of the Time" tells us that he was born in Hampshire about 1828, was educated partly in Germany, began with the law but abandoned it for literature. In 1851 he published a slim volume of poems, chiefly lyrical, some of them very fine, dedicated to his father-in-law. In 1855, "The Shaving of Shagpat, an Arabian Entertainment"; humorous, sententious, vividly picturesque. In 1857, "Farina, a Legend of Cologne," a slighter piece of phantastic-poetic pleasantry. In 1859, this "Richard Feverel," in three vols.; for the work is really twenty years old, though the new edition gives no notice of the preceding, just as its title-page mentions no other works by the same author. In 1861, "Evan

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Harrington," which first appeared in *Once a Week*. In 1862, "Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside, with Poems and Ballads," affectionately inscribed to Captain Maxse, R.N.; whereof little will soon die. "Modern Love" is a series of Rembrandt etchings, for sombre intensity and concision, summed up in the closing quatrain:—

"In tragic hints here see what evermore
Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,
Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,
To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!"

The Roadside Philosophers—"Juggling Jerry," the "Old Chartist," the "Beggar" soliloquising, and the "Patriotic Engineer," with "Grandfather Bridgeman"—are as genial as harvest sunshine. "Cassandra," "Margaret's Bridal Eve," "The Head of Bran," "By Morning Twilight," "Shemselnihar," and the "Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn," are full of noble power and passion. In 1864 and 1866, his masterpieces, "Emilia in England," and its sequel, "Vittoria," the latter from the *Fortnightly Review*; both, despite defects of construction in "Vittoria," which celebrates the struggle of Northern Italy against Austria, not to be successful until many years later, challenging comparison with the very greatest achievements in their kind. Between these, in 1865, "Rhoda Fleming." In 1871, "Adventures of Harry Richmond," first in *Cornhill*. In 1876, from the *Fortnightly*, "Beauchamp's Career," to which attention was called in our "Smoke Room Table." Add a couple of novelettes

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in the *New Quarterly Magazine*, and some poems, not yet collected, in the *Fortnightly*, etc., with a few critiques, and we have a pretty complete list of the manifest results of about thirty years' high-minded and miserably appreciated labour.

He may be termed, accurately enough for a brief indication, the Robert Browning of our novelists ; and his day is bound to come, as Browning's at length has come. The flaccid and feeble folk, who want literature and art that can be inhaled as idly as the perfume of a flower, must naturally shrink from two such earnestly strenuous spirits, swifter than eagles, stronger than lions, in whom, to use the magnificent and true language of Coleridge concerning Shakespeare, "The intellectual power and the creative energy wrestle as in a war-embrace." But men who have lived and observed and pondered, who love intellect and genius and genuine passion, who have eyes and ears open to the mysterious miracles of nature and art, who flinch not from keenest insight into the world and life, who are wont to probe and analyse with patient subtlety the intricate social and personal problems of our complex quasi-civilisation, who look not to mere plot as the be-all and end-all of a novel reflecting human character and life, who willingly dispense with the childish sugar-plums of so-called poetical justice which they never find dispensed in the grown-up work-o'-day world, who can respond with thought to thought, and passion to passion, and imagination to imagination ; and, lastly, who can appreciate a style vital and plastic as the

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ever-evolving living world it depicts, equal to all emergencies, which can revel with clowns and fence with fine ladies and gentlemen, yet rise to all grandeurs of Nature and Destiny and the human soul in fieriest passion and action: such men, who cannot abound anywhere, but who should be less rare among meditative smokers than in the rest of the community, will find a royal treasure-house of delight and instruction and suggestion in the works of George Meredith.

EVAN HARRINGTON



VIII

THE SATURDAY REVIEW

ON

EVAN HARRINGTON

[From *The Saturday Review*, vol. xi., No. 273, January 19, 1861, pp. 76-77.]

WHO would have thought that a really good novel could have been written on so very unpromising a subject as the history of a tailor who was mistaken for a gentleman? "Evan Harrington" is a surprisingly good novel; for we are almost incredulous of our own admiration until the story has fairly carried us away with it, and then we own that there can be no doubt about its power to interest us. At first, it seems like trifling with readers that a novelist should take for his theme a subject so exactly appropriate to a farce. We resign ourselves to a pleasant writer, and say that if Mr. Meredith chooses to write such a book we like to read it, but that it is a pity he is not working a more promising field. When we have finished, we look back as on a story new in conception, new in the study of character, fresh, odd, a little extravagant, but noble and original. Hackneyed novel readers must own that here they

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have the luxury of a novelty offered them. The tailor is a gentleman by education, in thought, and in every act. Half against his will he is taken for a member of a well-known family bearing the same name, and he is welcomed to the house of a baronet, and to the heart of the baronet's daughter. The young people love each other, and the tailor wins the lady in the character of a gentleman. Rose's maid kindly informs him how her young mistress shuddered when she repeated to herself the awful word "snip," which some malignant who suspected the truth had suggested with respect to her lover. But whenever honesty distinctly bids him to own he is a tailor, he does so; and after he has been led by passion to avow his love he summons up all his courage, and tells Rose that he is the snip she detests. She is all frankness, loyalty, and enthusiasm, vows she will never desert him, goes straight to her father and mother and avows to them that a tailor is to be their son-in-law. It is hard to fancy the situation in real life, but no one can say that it is impossible; and directly we have become familiarized with the thought, an author who seizes on it has a vast range of feeling to work upon in order to win our attention. Mr. Meredith has made the discovery that if the farcical side of life is taken seriously, it is full of fine tragedy and comedy. This may almost be called a discovery, for even if every one would have previously acknowledged its truth, no one had made a romance out of his perception of it. A shy honest man is contrasted and coupled with a frank,

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dashing, honest girl, and they are separated by tailordom. There is no end to the struggles of passion and principle that this opening may not lead to. Very judiciously, Mr. Meredith makes the tailor's love triumphant early in the story. He is not kept low too long. He is soon ennobled by the love bestowed on him by a heroine who deserves to be a heroine. The mental difficulties and social struggles of a couple advanced thus far give much more room for subtle delineation and for highly-strung feeling than if the tailor were only emancipated at the end of the story from his goose and cabbage. "Evan Harrington" has the great merit of increasing as it goes on in interest. The tailor becomes nobler and better. The heroine passes through her little troubles in a way that makes us sometimes pity her and sometimes admire her. The story has, of course, its defects. It pays the penalty of originality. Tailordom in the clouds is a novelty; but we have a little too much of tailordom in the clouds. A novelty must in these latter days of writing be something special, singular, and probably minute. If the writer passes into the general current of life, he has been anticipated. This tailor-gentleman is something out of the way, and all society is made to sweep rather exclusively round the one central figure of an ambiguous snip. This is the inevitable drawback the author has had to pay for the choice of his subject, and in spite of the drawback his choice has turned out wonderfully successful.

There are three things which a writer who wants

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to produce a good novel must hit upon. He brings with him, we will suppose, a fine style and an abundance of philosophical remarks, which he can pour over any subject. But in the subject he selects he must offer us, first, a good plot; secondly, one or more striking, new, and fully described chief characters; and thirdly, a good group of those minor personages who are the Gibeonites of the leading performers, and draw water and hew wood as they are wanted. Mr. Meredith has got a new plot, and a good hero and heroine, who are, as it were, part of the plot; for the whole story turns on the feelings of a particular sort of tailor and a particular sort of tailor's betrothed. And he has also got a prominent character to help the plot on, and to put the hero and heroine in and out of their troubles; and this prominent character is so well drawn as to raise Mr. Meredith to a very considerable height in the list of novel-writers. This person is a sister of the tailor, and by a skilful manœuvre she has managed to marry a penniless Portuguese Count. The one dream of the Countess's life is to marry her brother to an heiress, and her greatest personal ambition is to conceal for ever that she is the daughter and sister of a tailor. She goes with the tailor-hero to the Baronet's house, and there spins her plots, brings all the men to her feet, quarrels with the women, and so manages by a mixture of flattery, courting, lies, and threats, that even old acquaintances who knew her in her unfledged days dare not say to each other that this magnificent and fascinating Countess de

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Saldar de Sancorvo is the tailor's daughter they once flirted with. The one inherent fault of the book naturally casts its shade over the Countess. All this struggle to avoid the exposure of tailordom is petty and monotonous in itself, and is only raised by the noble traits of character it awakens in Rose and her snip. The Countess is amusing from the first, but the amusement she provides us with is that of a good farce, until she begins to borrow a dignity from the elevation of the persons whose fortunes she affects. But if we take her as she is meant to be—if we once accept this horror of tailordom as capable of awakening profound emotions—she is admirable. There are touches in her portrait that are masterly. She mixes up with her detestably mean stratagems a strange recognition of the claims of Providence which is irresistibly comic; and the affectation of foreign habits, manners, and opinions which she puts before her as a shield and an attraction is so natural that it seems as if we must have been reading about a real person. If any one wants to gain a notion of the trouble and contrivance it takes to write a good novel, let him ask himself how far he would be capable of devising a series of stratagems by which a foreigneering Countess should bring together or separate a tailor and a young lady.

The minor characters belong to a lower walk of art. They are not bad or good. Many men and women could have struck them off; and not a few of them are familiar friends in the world of farces. The rapid young gentleman, shunning care, quoting

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scraps of poetry, and finally marrying a lady's-maid ; the eccentric bachelor, as whimsical as he is rich ; the drawling, offensive, hard lordling, have long been "household words" on the comic stage. It is, indeed, very difficult to draw a minor character with sufficient distinctness, unless by giving it certain very marked peculiarities. These may be the peculiarities of a class, and then we have the usual pert lady's-maid, roguish valet, eccentric uncle, and so forth. Or the peculiarities may be merely the accidental signs of an individual, and then we have Mr. Carker with his teeth, and persons of a similar stamp. Mr. Meredith tries hard to keep his minor characters out of these fixed and unnatural forms, and he succeeds so far that the characters he chooses to assign them tell upon the action of the story, and do not merely grow beside it. There is also a mode of constructing minor characters, which Mr. Meredith adopts with some success. It is that of making them studies of moral development under peculiar circumstances. Thus, for example, there is a second young lady in love with the tailor. She is a sickly fright, diseased in body and mind. But she fixes her affections on the tailor, and is ready to die when he will not have her. The truth which she has more particularly the honour of illustrating is that a young lady so formed in body and soul would be especially captivated with the externals of a lover. She adores the build, the look, the hair, and eyes of the tailor, and is indifferent to his loyalty and generosity. She thus acts as a foil, and brings to light the more elevated tastes of the

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heroine. We are quite ready to allow, as we read the story of this poor creature's sorrows, that Mr. Meredith may very likely be right, and that Juliana loves the sort of qualities in a man which a sickly fright would be likely to love. When we have once acknowledged this, we cannot avoid seeing that, although she is not very pleasant to read about, she lends at once plausibility and interest to the story.

It is very difficult to measure the kind of praise which such a book as "Evan Harrington" ought to receive; and yet criticism ought to be able to offer some scale by which praise is to be regulated. Readers naturally ask themselves what is the merit that is really meant to be attributed to a book which they are advised to read. We cannot fix the position of every good book, but still we may approximate to doing so. Every now and then there is published a work, like "Esmond," or "Adam Bede," or "Martin Chuzzlewit," which is clearly first-rate, which becomes at once part of English literature, and helps to form the thought and style of a generation. On the other hand, there are every season published not only heaps of trashy stories, but a fair supply of readable, meritorious, creditable novels. Further, there are every year, or almost every year, published four or five really good novels, powerful in their way, new, or rather new, capable of making an impression and of suggesting thought. Such works do not generally raise an expectation that they will be handed down to any very late date; but as they pass away, we feel that they are some of the best

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things that we reject and let float at once down the stream. Some of them may survive, for the judgment of contemporaries has often been reversed, and another generation may think even more of them than we do. But usually the contemporaries are right, and in the abundance of romances it is best they should be forgotten after they have given delight for a short time. To this class "Evan Harrington" seems to us to belong. It is not a great work, but it is a remarkable one, and deserves a front place in the literature that is ranked as avowedly not destined to endure.

MODERN LOVE



IX

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

ON

MODERN LOVE

[This is Swinburne's reply to a review of "Modern Love" in *The Spectator* of May 24, 1862. It appeared in No. 1771 of that journal, pp. 632-633, on June 7, 1862.]

MR. GEORGE MEREDITH'S "MODERN LOVE"

(*Letter to the Editor.*)

SIR,—I cannot resist asking the favour of admission for my protest against the article on Mr. Meredith's last volume of poems in the *Spectator* of May 24th. That I personally have for the writings, whether verse or prose, of Mr. Meredith a most sincere and deep admiration is no doubt a matter of infinitely small moment. I wish only, in default of a better, to appeal seriously on general grounds against this sort of criticism as applied to one of the leaders of English literature. To any fair attack Mr. Meredith's books of course lie as much open as another man's; indeed, standing where he does, the very eminence of his post makes him perhaps more liable than a man of less well-earned fame to the periodical slings and arrows of publicity. Against such criticism

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no one would have a right to appeal, whether for his own work or for another's. But the writer of the article in question blinks at starting the fact that he is dealing with no unfledged pretender. Any work of a man who has won his spurs, and fought his way to a foremost place among the men of his time, must claim at least a grave consideration and respect. It would hardly be less absurd, in remarking on a poem by Mr. Meredith, to omit all reference to his previous work, and treat the present book as if its author had never tried his hand at such writing before, than to criticize the "*Légende des Siècles*," or (coming to a nearer instance) the "*Idylls of the King*," without taking into account the relative position of the great English or the greater French poet. On such a tone of criticism as this any one who may chance to see or hear of it has a right to comment.

But even if the case were different, and the author were now at his starting-point, such a review of such a book is surely out of date. Praise or blame should be thoughtful, serious, careful, when applied to a work of such subtle strength, such depth of delicate power, such passionate and various beauty, as the leading poem of Mr. Meredith's volume: in some points, as it seems to me (and in this opinion I know that I have weightier judgments than my own to back me) a poem above the aim and beyond the reach of any but its author. Mr. Meredith is one of the three or four poets now alive whose work, perfect or imperfect, is always as noble in

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design as it is often faultless in result. The present critic falls foul of him for dealing with "a deep and painful subject on which he has no conviction to express." There are pulpits enough for all preachers in prose; the business of verse-writing is hardly to express convictions; and if some poetry, not without merit of its kind, has at times dealt in dogmatic morality, it is all the worse and all the weaker for that. As to subject, it is too much to expect that all schools of poetry are to be for ever subordinate to the one just now so much in request with us, whose scope of sight is bounded by the nursery walls; that all Muses are to bow down before her who babbles, with lips yet warm from their pristine pap, after the dangling delights of a child's coral; and jingles with flaccid fingers one knows not whether a jester's or a baby's bells. We have not too many writers capable of duly handling a subject worth the serious interest of men. As to execution, take almost any sonnet at random out of the series, and let any man qualified to judge for himself of metre, choice of expression, and splendid language, decide on its claims. And, after all, the test will be unfair, except as regards metrical or pictorial merit; every section of this great progressive poem being connected with the other by links of the finest and most studied workmanship. Take, for example, that noble sonnet, beginning

"We saw the swallows gathering in the skies,"

a more perfect piece of writing no man alive has

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ever turned out ; witness these three lines, the grandest perhaps of the book :

“ And in the largeness of the evening earth,
Our spirit grew as we walked side by side ;
The hour became her husband, and my bride ;”

but in transcription it must lose the colour and effect given it by its place in the series ; the grave and tender beauty, which makes it at once a bridge and a resting-place between the admirable poems of passion it falls among. As specimens of pure power, and depth of imagination at once intricate and vigorous, take the two sonnets on a false passing reunion of wife and husband ; the sonnet on the rose ; that other beginning :

“ I am not of those miserable males
Who sniff at vice, and daring not to snap,
Do therefore hope for heaven.”

And, again, that earlier one :

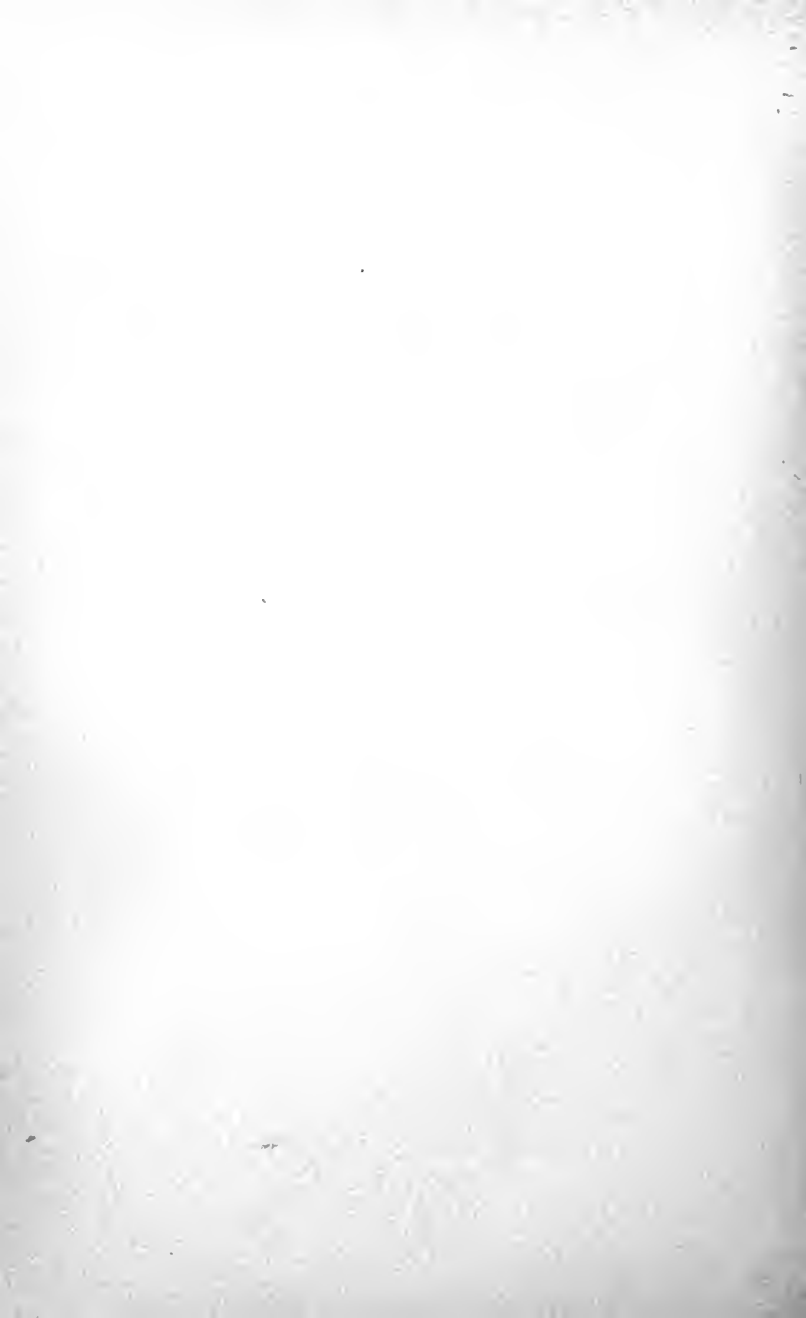
“ All other joys of life he strove to warm.”

Of the shorter poems which give character to the book I have not space to speak here ; and as the critic has omitted noticing the most valuable and important (such as the “ Beggar’s Soliloquy,” and the “ Old Chartist,” equal to Béranger for completeness of effect and exquisite justice of style, but noticeable for a thorough dramatic insight, which Béranger missed through his personal passions and partialities), there is no present need to go into the matter.

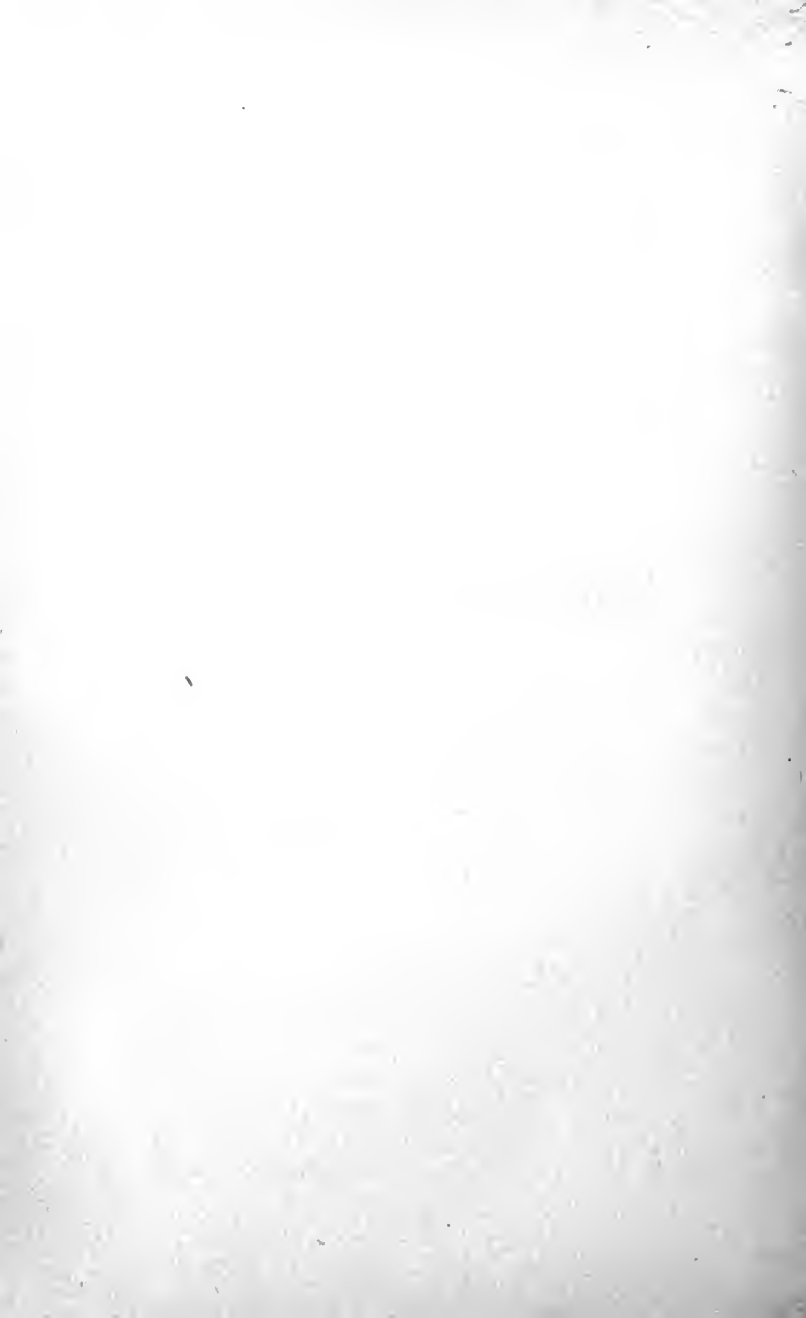
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I ask you to admit this protest simply out of justice to the book in hand, believing as I do that it expresses the deliberate unbiassed opinion of a sufficient number of readers to warrant the insertion of it, and leaving to your consideration rather their claims to a fair hearing than those of the book's author to a revised judgment. A poet of Mr. Meredith's rank can no more be profited by the advocacy of his admirers than injured by the rash or partial attack of his critics.

A. C. SWINBURNE.



EMILIA IN ENGLAND



X

RICHARD GARNETT

ON

EMILIA IN ENGLAND

[This review, initialled "G.," appeared in *The Reader*, vol. iii., No. 69, pp. 514-515, April 23, 1864.]

THE announcement of a new work by Mr. George Meredith is necessarily one to provoke much curiosity and expectation, since even a moderate approximation to the end he has been wont to propose to himself implies unusual ability of an unusual description. Mr. Meredith belongs to that select band of humorists who mainly rely for effect upon the pungency and piquancy of their diction, whether uttered in their own character, or placed in the mouths of their *dramatis personæ*. Few writers indeed could dispose of resources adequate to so sustained a display of intellectual pyrotechnics as that which has now lasted Mr. Meredith through nine volumes. It is comparatively easy to devise humorous situations; but this is farce. Mr. Meredith's works are the best modern representatives of the genteel comedy of a hundred and fifty years since. Incident and character are not neglected; but both

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are subordinate to dialogue. The personages have their prototypes in nature, but are still somewhat idealised: they are like and not like people we have seen. They are rather types of character than individuals. Maskwell in Congreve's comedy, for example, is a really scientific combination of the chief traits of a designing villain; but we may perceive at once that these have been ingeniously put together in the study, not copied from the living model. It is a significant circumstance that all Congreve's plays were composed at an age when Mr. Meredith had hardly begun to write. The latter's experience of life is consequently much wider, and there is that in the genius of his time which causes him to be more solicitous about the truth of things. Nevertheless, next to the intellectual brilliancy of his writings, their most salient feature is their artificial aspect. A principle of intelligent selection seems to have presided over their genesis and development. The story is carefully chosen for the sake of some favourite idea snugly bedded in the centre of it—a Psyche-germ, swathed in a rich cocoon of illustration. The personages are all selected with a similar view, and their sayings and doings meted out with the nicest accuracy. The style again is highly *recherché*, spiced with epigram, and elaborated even to obscurity. It might easily be surmised that Mr. Meredith experienced considerable difficulty in arraying his thoughts in their appropriate garment of speech, and that the frequent harshness of his exposition was the evidence of a victory won by a

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vigorous growth over an unkindly soil. Thus rich, original, strained, and artificial, the general effect of one of Mr. Meredith's novels is very much that of a fine landscape seen through tinted glass—a pleasing variety, so long as there are plain windows in the house. To read Mr. Meredith in his turn is to season the feast of literature with an exquisite condiment ; to read nobody but Mr. Meredith would be like making a dinner of salt—Attic, of course.

“ Emilia in England ” is fully equal to the author's former works in humour and power, and only less remarkable in so far as it is less original. The plot is a variation on the theme of “ Evan Harrington.” The comedy of that admirable novel turned on the struggle of three sisters, upheaved into a higher than their natural sphere, with the demon of Tailordom ; their frantic efforts to entomb the monstrous corpse of their plebeian origin beneath the hugest available heaps of acted and spoken lies ; the vigorous resistance of that ghastly being to this method of disposing of him, and his victorious assertion of his right to walk the earth. The more serious interest arose from the entanglement of their straightforward brother in their web of imposition, not without the participation of the mischievous deity of Love. In “ Emilia ” we have three sisters again—the Misses Pole—Pole, Polar, and North Pole, or, as the profane have entitled them, Pole, Polony, and Maypole. The situation is fundamentally the same, but so far varied that the ladies have no chance of concealing their mercantile origin, of which, indeed, to do them justice, they are

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not ashamed. They simply wish to get higher, and, by way of justifying their ambition to themselves, have set up a fancied code of feelings supposed to be proper to the highest circles, to which, by way of demonstrating their fitness for the same, they make it the study of their lives to conform.

"They went on perpetually mounting. It is still a good way from the head of the tallest of men to the stars; so they had their work before them; but, as they observed, they were young. To be brief, they were very ambitious damsels, aiming at they knew not exactly what, save that it was something so wide that it had not a name, and so high in air that no one could see it. They knew assuredly that their circle did not please them. So, therefore, they were constantly extending and refining it: extending it perhaps for the purpose of refining it. Their susceptibilities demanded that they should escape from a city circle. Having no mother, they ruled their father's house and him, and were at least commanders of whatsoever forces they could summon for the task. It may be seen that they were sentimentalists. That is to say, they supposed that they enjoyed exclusive possession of the Nice Feelings, and exclusively comprehended the Fine Shades. Whereof more will be said; but in the mean time it will explain their propensity to mount; it will account for their irritation at the material obstructions surrounding them; and possibly the philosopher will now have his eye on the source of that extraordinary sense of superiority to mankind which was the crown of their complacent brows. Eclipsed as they may be in the gross appreciation of the world by other people, who excel in this and that accomplishment, persons that nourish the Nice Feelings and are intimate with the Fine Shades carry their own test of intrinsic value."

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That is, they lived by a conventional rule, just as the baronet in Mr. Meredith's first novel brought up his son upon system. Mr. Meredith appears to entertain a special detestation for anything cut and dried, and the gist of his present work is a sarcastic but quiet exposure of the evil these ladies wrought against their better nature. The following passage will give some idea of what these worshippers of *Fine Shades* are called upon to endure :—

“At breakfast in the morning, it was the habit of all the ladies to assemble, partly to countenance the decency of *matin-prayers*, and also to give the head of the household their dutiful society till business called him away. Adela, in earlier days, had maintained that early rising was not fashionable; but she soon grasped the idea that a great rivalry with Fashion, in minor matters (where the support of the satirist might be counted on), was the proper policy of Brookfield. Mrs. Chump was given to be extremely fashionable in her hours, and began her Brookfield career by coming downstairs at ten and eleven o'clock, when she found a desolate table, well-stocked, indeed, but without any of the exuberant smiles of nourishment which a morning repast should wear. ‘You are a Protestant, ma’am, are you not?’ Adela mildly questioned, after informing her that she missed family prayer by her late descent. Mrs. Chump assured her that she was a firm Protestant, and liked to see faces at the breakfast-table. The poor woman was reduced to submit to the rigour of the hour, coming down flustered, and endeavouring to look devout, while many uncertainties as to the condition of the looks of her attire distracted her mind and fingers. On one occasion, Gainsford, the footman, had been seen with his eye on her; and while Mr. Pole read of sacred things, at a pace

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composed of slow march and amble, this unhappy man was heard struggling to keep under and extinguish a devil of laughter, by which his human weakness was shaken. He retired from the room with the speed of a voyager about to pay tribute on high seas. Mr. Pole cast a pregnant look towards the servants' row as he closed the book; but the expression of his daughters' faces positively signified that no remark was to be made, and he contained himself. Later, the ladies told him that Gainsford had done no worse than any uneducated man would have been guilty of doing. Mrs. Chump had, it appeared, a mother's feeling for one flat curl on her rugged forehead, which was often fondly caressed by her, for the sake of ascertaining its fixity. Doubts of the precision of outline and general welfare of this curl, apparently, caused her to straighten her back and furtively raise her head, with an easy upward motion, as of a cork alighted in water, above the level of the looking-glass on her left hand—an action she repeated, with a solemn aspect, four times; at which point Gainsford gave way. The ladies accorded him every extenuation for the offence. They themselves, but for the heroism of exalted natures, must have succumbed to the gross temptation. 'It is difficult, dear papa, to bring one's mind to religious thoughts in her company, even when she is quiescent,' they said. Thus, by the prettiest exercise of charity that can be conceived, they pleaded for the man Gainsford, while they struck a blow at Mrs. Chump; and, in performing one of the virtues laid down by religion, proved their enemy to be hostile to its influences."

Emilia Belloni, the heroine, is an entire contrast to the Miss Poles. She is in most respects a repetition of Rose Jocelyn in "Evan Harrington"—a pattern of pure nature, perfect guilelessness, absolute

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unreserve, and entire surrender to self-oblivious passion. She combines the unembarrassed purity of an antique statue with the fire of a painting of the modern school. She is most pathetic in her confiding simplicity—in her frankness perfectly irresistible. This complete self-abandonment is powerfully contrasted with Wilfrid Pole's merely sentimental feeling for the beautiful stranger, and paralleled with Merthyr Powys's devotion to the cause of Emilia's country. Here are the materials of an excellent drama; and, though the interest of the book does not mainly depend upon the incidents, there are sufficient to prevent it from flagging to any great extent. The chief obstacles to its success will probably be found in the peculiarity of the style, the quaintness (so pleasant to those who have once learned to relish it) of Mr. Meredith's habits of thought, and the idealisation of the characters. There is a soul of truth in them all; but it is sometimes rather grotesquely incarnated. A hostile criticism might enlarge on their unlikeness to ordinary mortals. The reply must be that they are meant to embody certain types of thought and feeling, and consequently rather made to order than sketched from the life. This employment of Mr. Meredith's talents is perfectly legitimate, especially after the proofs he has given of his ability to reproduce actual character with unimpaired effect. Observation alone could have furnished material for such vivid delineations as those of Mrs. Chump, in whose vicinity sentiment is barely possible, and Mr.

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Pericles, Greek millionaire, musical bear, and beneficent ogre. Perhaps the scenes where he appears are the richest in a work scintillating throughout with wit and humour, nor yet devoid of patches of tender moonlight, like this last appearance of Emilia in England:—

“A sharp breath of air had passed along the dews, and all the young green of the fresh season shone in white jewels. The sky, set with very dim, distant stars, was in grey light round a small brilliant moon. Every space of earth lifted clear to her; the woodland listened; and in the bright silence the nightingale sang loud.

“Emilia and Tracy Runningbrook were treading their way towards a lane over which great oak branches inter-volved; thence, under larches, all with glittering sleeves, and among spiky brambles, with the purple leaf and the crimson frosted. The frost on the edges of the brown-leaved bracken gave a faint colour. Here and there intense silver dazzled their eyes. As they advanced amid the icy hush, so hard and instant was the ring of the earth under them, their steps sounded as if expected.

“‘This night seems made for me!’ said Emilia.

“Tracy had no knowledge of the object of the expedition. He was her squire, simply; had pitched on a sudden into an enamoured condition, and walked beside her, caring little whither he was led, so that she left him not.

“They came upon a clearing in the wood where a tournament of knights might have been held. Ranged on two sides were rows of larches, and forward, fit to plume a dais, a clump of tall firs stood with a flowing silver fir to right and left, and the white stems of the birch tree shining from among them. This fair woodland court had three broad oaks, as for gateways; and the moon was

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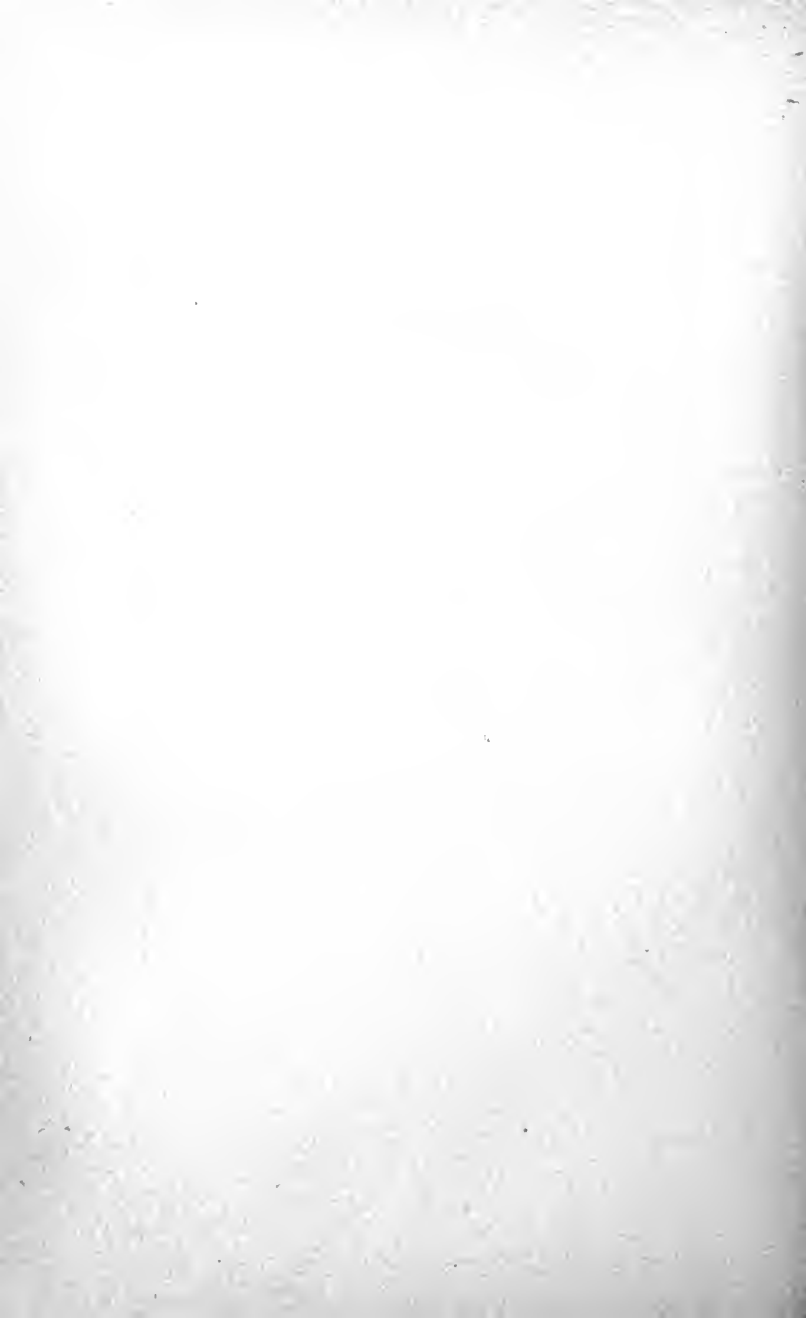
above it. Moss and the frosted brown fern were its flooring.

"Emilia said eagerly, 'This way,' and ran under one of the oaks. She turned to Tracy, following: 'There is no doubt of it.' Her hand was lying softly on her throat.

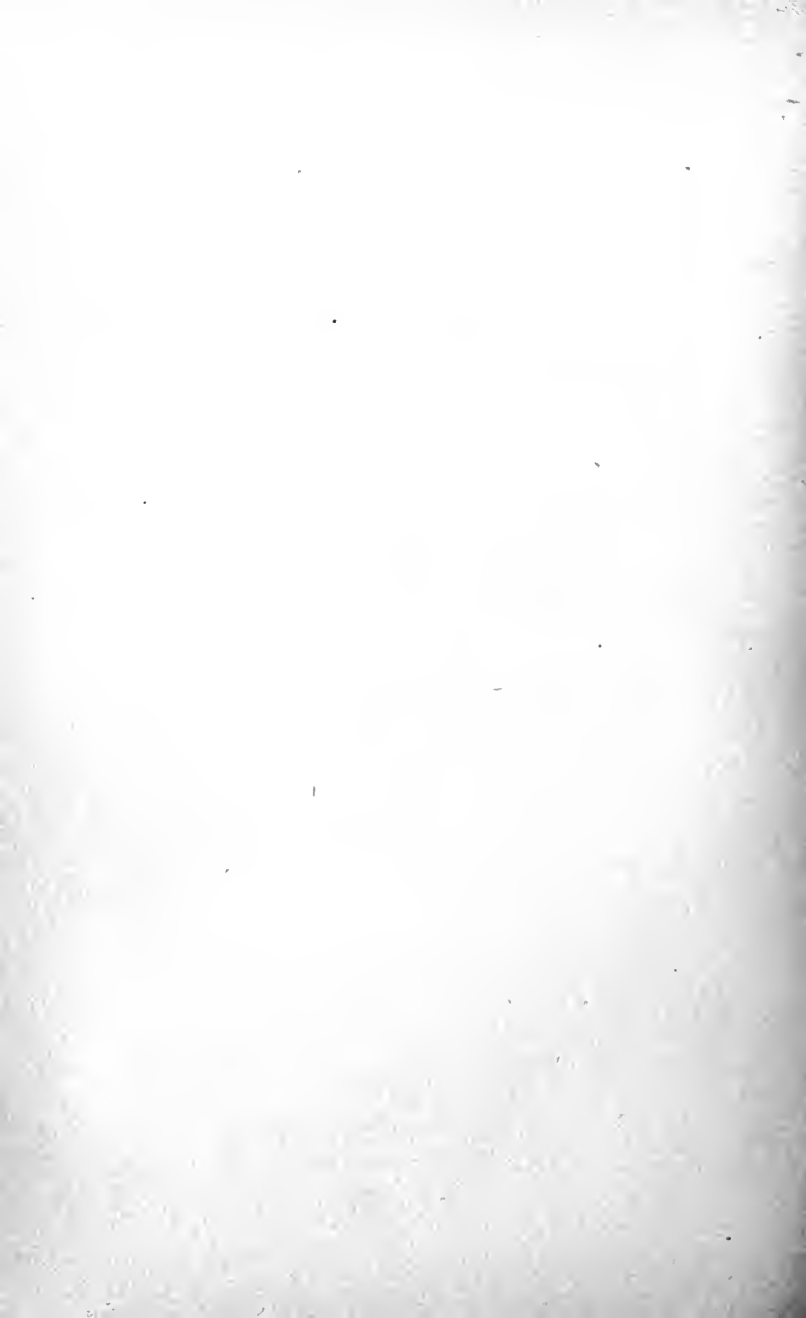
"'Your voice?' Tracy divined her.

"She nodded, but frowned lovingly at the shout he raised; and he understood that there was haply some plot to be worked out. The open space was quite luminous in the middle of those three deep walls of shadow. Emilia enjoined him to rest where he was, and wait for her on that spot like a faithful sentinel, whatsoever ensued. Coaxing his promise, she entered the square of white light alone. Presently she stood upon a low mound, so that her whole figure was distinct, while the moon made her features visible.

"Expectancy sharpened the stillness to Tracy's ears. A nightingale began the charm. He was answered by another. Many were soon in song, till even the pauses were sweet with them. Tracy had the thought that they were calling for Emilia to commence; that it was nature preluding the divine human voice, weaving her spell for it. He was seized by a thirst to hear the adorable girl, who stood there patiently, with her face lifted soft in moonlight. And then the blood thrilled along his veins, as if one more than mortal had touched him. It seemed to him long, before he knew that Emilia's voice was in the air."



RHODA FLEMING



XI
THE SATURDAY REVIEW
ON
RHODA FLEMING

[From *The Saturday Review*, vol. 20, No. 520, October 14, 1865, pp. 489-490.]

IT is a great comfort to those who admire manly thinking and good English to find that Mr. Meredith has, for a time at least, abandoned the over-subtle and unfruitful speculations upon character and society which made his last novel a peculiarly conspicuous instance of both originality and labour failing to redeem the prime mistake of an ill-chosen theme. There are so few writers who combine creative power with that faculty of a large and liberal observation of life which alone can make their creations real or worth studying, that one grudges anything like waste of a kind of ability so uncommon. Mr. Meredith no doubt takes a high place among novelists of this rank. In all his books he introduces us to fresh and vigorously drawn characters. He never resorts to the "common form" of fiction. The mass of novels are like a very select circle in society; night after night, though the names and dresses and scenes

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are slightly changed, the reader meets exactly the same set of people, and they all talk in exactly the same fashion, and do the same sort of things. It is something for which to be grateful to find a writer who has the power, and takes the trouble, to exhibit new characters; and to exhibit them, moreover, as doing and feeling what they would do and feel in the ordinary human way, not as if they were visibly playing at being characters in a novel. Besides this, Mr. Meredith has the excellent negative quality of abstaining from superfluous and unprovoked padding. He does not deny himself frequent asides—though they are rarer in “Rhoda Fleming” than in his previous books—but then these asides are not digressions on things in general. They spring easily from the action of the story, and we are not sent clean out of our track and then back into it again by two violent jolts. Of course, in escaping from the vices or feebleness of ordinary fiction, it was not to be expected that Mr. Meredith should altogether avoid the invention of one or two vices of his own. He is occasionally obscure in his reflections, carrying his reader too hastily forward over stony places and up steep ascents of argument, and landing him breathless he scarce knows where. A plain man has a desire, perhaps a weak one, to see the path by which he has been transported into unfamiliar regions, but Mr. Meredith inconsiderately argues in seven-league boots. The fault is the natural result of one of his chief excellences. He has such a complete and personal intimacy with the people of his story, he

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realizes so vividly to himself their characteristics and the effects of the situation upon them, as to forget that the reader of a novel knows nothing about the personages who act in it beyond what the author chooses to tell them. We require to have a very great deal told us about a man whose character we are asked to understand, when we only know him through the imperfectly conducting medium of print. The same vividness of conception on the part of the author may perhaps account for the oblique way in which the incidents of the story are revealed. We seem to be too often introduced to the effect before getting any insight into the cause. The author has fully pictured the incident to his own mind, and then hastens to consider its consequences upon the character whom it concerns, the reader meanwhile rather wondering what it is all about, and what has happened. One or two things are scarcely made clear at all. What Mrs. Lovell and Major Waring had done in India, and what was the secret of the blood-stained handkerchief, are things only divulged to us very dimly, and left vague even to the very end. Obviously it is not pleasant to see the play through a film.

But these passing obscurities may well be forgotten in the vigorous and impressive painting of the more prominent figures, as well as in the admirable manliness with which Mr. Meredith has treated a situation that is commonly made the occasion either of sermonizing or of sentimentalism. The author declines to win popularity by either of these favourite and infallible devices. A girl who has been seduced

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is not, to him, a person whom, as an artist, it is his business either to preach over or to cry over. It may be the duty of the parson to moralize about the falling away ; and, on the other hand, a great many people like to have the woman who has committed this particular offence against society written about in a tone of mingled pity and pruriency, a mixture of snivelling and sniffing. With all this the artist has nothing to do. It is not his part to pass sentence for sins against society, nor to surround the sinner with all manner of artificial saintly crowns and heavenly haloes. To him the woman who sacrifices herself for passion is what she is, and no more. Much of her worth may survive, or she may be as unworthy after a fall as she was before. One must look at her with "rightful manliness"—without "those false sensations, peculiar to men, concerning the soiled purity of women, the lost innocence, the brand of shame upon her, which are commonly the foul sentimentalism of such as can be too eager in the chase of corruption when occasion suits, and are another side of pruriency, not absolutely foreign to the best of us in our youth." "The young man who can look upon them we call fallen women with a noble eye is to my mind he that is most nobly begotten of the race, and likeliest to be the sire of a noble line." In the same way, the stern sister is drawn without a touch of exaggeration in the direction either of sympathy or caricature. Rhoda's conviction that her sister in spite of all appearances is married, and her anger with anybody who ventures to hold the more probable

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opinion, are brought out with remarkable truth. In the days of their youth she and her sister had accidental occasion to ponder much on the harshness with which the village had treated a luckless girl who had returned to it with a blemished name. "They could not fathom the meaning of their father's unkindness, coarseness, and indignation. Why and why? they asked one another blankly. The Scriptures were harsh in one part, but was the teaching to continue so after the atonement?" Then, in years after, when Dahlia's name became spotted, "the old and deep grievance in her heart as to what men thought of women and as to the harshness of men" was strongly stirred up. Her intense faith in her sister, and her resolute facing of the suspicions to which men's mean natures prompted them, furnish the key to the first half of her action in the story. This faith, indeed, is the only quality which keeps Rhoda from being too absolutely cold and passionless to be either truthfully drawn or interesting. When the fatal fact is forced upon her, and a chance of marriage is offered to her sister, the instinct which their Hebrew religious teaching implants in most English girls of strong nature impels her remorselessly to drive the fallen creature to the only step which can set her erect again before the world, though permanent wretchedness should be the clear result. She knows that "it is a good and precious thing to do right," and this is the one item of belief and knowledge to which she holds fast. And even when she finds that she has thus inflicted a curse

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upon her sister, "she had still a feeling of the harsh joy peculiar to those who have exercised command with a conscious righteousness upon wilful, sinful, and errant spirits, and have thwarted the wrongdoer." But—by an excellent touch by which the author shows the thoroughness and pliancy of his conception—she tries in vain to console herself in reflecting that the doom had been righteously executed when the unhappy Dahlia is before her. "Away from the tragic figure in the room, she might have thought so, but the horror in the eyes and voice of this awakened Sacrifice struck away the support of theoretic justification. Great pity for the poor enmeshed life, helpless there, and in woman's worst peril—looking either to madness or to death for an escape—drowned her reason in a heavy cloud of tears."

The weaker sort of novelist generally prides himself amazingly on what he deems the consistency of his characters. That is, he first casts them in a mould, rigidly and unchangeably formed, and they move to and fro on the scene like figures of iron propelled in one inevitable direction by interior clockwork. But Mr. Meredith is wholly free from this barren and enfeebling notion. Rhoda is stern, earnest, of the Hebrew or Puritanic complexion. But she is incredulous of her sister's sin for all that. Even when it is proved, she has no hard reproaches for the sinner. And a confidence in what her creed and custom have taught her to look on as the righteous course does not shut her heart up against sympathy with the creature upon whom the righteous

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course—as is too often its wont—has brought unutterable wretchedness. This flexibility of a distinctly drawn character before changing circumstances is an effect which our novelists rarely attempt. Mr. Meredith in all his books is particularly fond of tracing these variations. He places his personages in a number of given situations, and seems as it were to watch, almost for his own diversion, the development of character which ensues. The reader is persuaded that the growth of the hero or heroine's nature is spontaneous, though under the influence of surrounding things ; and this, in its own way, is a very distinct triumph of art. In the character of Edward Blencrove the author produces the same effect of movement, but, as it appears to us, with less success. The pivots on which the movement turns are less intelligible and less natural. Witty, selfish, half-cynical, to begin with, he is somehow overwhelmed by a moral revolution which leaves him devoted, and, indeed, on one occasion absolutely pious. The reader may complain that nothing through the first volume and a half furnishes even a hint that at bottom Edward has the smallest richness of nature, and that nothing has happened to produce so sudden a development of fine qualities. The ambitious and highly-cultivated *young* man is, we know, apt to react against the impulses both of ambition and of intellectual fastidiousness, and, when in the mood, to sacrifice prospects and everything else to a yearning for simplicity and a kind of virtuousness. But it is hard to see why inability to fathom the depths of Mrs. Lovell's

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character should make Edward write to Dahlia :—
“And I, who have sinned against my innocent darling, will ask her to pray with me that our future may be one, so that I may make good to her what she has suffered, and to the God whom we worship the offence I have committed.”

Mr. Meredith's exclusive devotion to play of character would seem to lie at the root of what is his chief defect—weakness of construction. His situations hang too loosely together. Provided he can make his characters grow and move, provided he can throw a sufficient variety of light and colour over them, he is comparatively indifferent to the close coherence of his incidents, or to anything like a compact and finished story. There is unquestionably something exceedingly poor in the popular craving for a minute final account of what becomes of everybody who has figured ever so slightly in the story. A novelist does well to refuse to go through a muster-roll of his characters at the end of the third volume, sending all the bad people into misery, and rewarding all the good people by happy lives ever after. This makes the whole thing so plainly and horribly artificial that we cannot expect a writer who claims a place among artists to institute this sort of parade. Still, Mr. Meredith leaves us a little too abruptly. It seems as if he had got as much amusement for himself as he wished out of the movements of his characters, and then had ceased to take interest in what might become of them. The reader may be pardoned for feeling rather less like an Epicurean

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god. Mr. Meredith has the art of drawing men and women so like flesh and blood that we naturally have at least a human interest in their fate.

There are in "Rhoda Fleming" some admirably fresh and vigorous sketches of country life and nature. The father of Rhoda is an excellent specimen of the sturdy British yeoman, whose ideas are very few and very simple, but obstinate and deep-rooted in proportion. He is overwhelmingly grateful, and even respectful, to the man who marries his daughter, though he knows him to be a villain; and he insists on her joining her husband, though her joining him means certain and enduring misery. All this makes us dreadfully angry, but it is uncommonly true to rural nature. The scene at the Pilot Inn, too, is exquisitely humorous and truthful. So are the minor characters of Mrs. Sumfit and Master Gammon, the two old farm-servants. The latter is really inimitable. Dahlia is lying ill up-stairs:—

"Nevertheless, the sight of Master Gammon was like a comforting medicine to all who were in the house. He was Mrs. Sumfit's clock; he was balm and blessedness in Rhoda's eyes; Anthony was jealous of him; the farmer held to him as to a stake in the ground; even Robert, who rallied and tormented, and was vexed by him, admitted that he stood some way between an example and a warning, and was a study. The grand primæval quality of unchangeableness as exhibited by this old man affected them singularly in their recovery from the storm and the wreck of the hours gone by; so much so that they could not divest themselves of the idea that it was a manifestation of power in Master Gammon to show forth undisturbed while they

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were feeling their life shaken in them to the depths. I have never had the opportunity of examining the idol-worshipping mind of a savage; but it seems possible that the immutability of aspect of his little wooden god may sometimes touch him with a similar astounded awe; even when, and indeed especially after, he has thrashed it. Had the old man betrayed his mortality in a sign of curiosity to know why the hubbub of trouble had arisen, and who was to blame, and what was the story, the effect on them would have been diminished. He really seemed granite among the turbulent waves. 'Give me Gammon's life!' was father Fleming's prayerful interjection; seeing him come and go, sit at his meals, and sleep and wake in season, all through those tragic hours of suspense, without a question to anybody. Once or twice, when his eye fell upon the doctor, Master Gammon appeared to meditate."

Algernon Blancove is a capital study of the minor rank. "This youth is one of great Nature's tom-fools, an elegant young gentleman outwardly, of the very large class who are simply the engines of their appetites, and to the philosophic eye still run wild in woods." However, "the most worthless creature is most serviceable for examination, when the microscope is applied to them [it?], as a simple study of human mechanism." This sentence may be said to be the secret of Mr. Meredith's workmanship. It is essentially microscopic, and those who have a sufficiently strong taste for art to relish such studies will find "Rhoda Fleming" very well worth reading. Besides this, the story itself is eminently interesting—almost too interesting, in fact, to leave us tranquil enough for the appreciation of the more substantial part.

XII

THE MORNING POST

ON

RHODA FLEMING

[The Manager of *The Morning Post* states that according to the marked file of his journal this review was written by a Mr. Hume. It was printed in the issue of October 18, 1865, No. 28,658, p. 2.]

MR. MEREDITH'S story is one of those clever social portrait-albums that are taken up, not by the thoughtless and idle, but by men and women of genius, intellect and cultivation. It would be impossible to find a novel of the last few years in which more attention has been given to a careful study of human nature, and with such marked success, as in the pages of "Rhoda Fleming." The most insignificant portrait may be examined separately, and it will be found to contain subject-matter for analysis and reflection. Every phase of society is depicted—from the baronet banker to the low, cunning pot-house frequenter. High and low, rich and poor, farmer and fop, have all their places in Mr. Meredith's gallery; and to say that not one is distorted by over-colouring is giving him the highest commendation it is possible to bestow. Mrs. Lovell, the gay, fashionable, captivating,

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extravagant, good-natured widow, may be seen every day and night of the London season. Edward and Algernon will be found in chambers at the Temple, or strolling down Pall-mall between four and five p.m. daily. *Dahlia* is a true but sad picture of the sufferings of one who has gone astray from the paths of virtue, and excites the keenest pity and admiration in the reader—the former, because her sorrows and trials are told with such deep feeling; the latter, because the sketch is so painfully and vividly real. The simplicity and innocence of Farmer Fleming are exactly what might be expected from one whose knowledge of London consists in knowing little more than that there is such a place, and that it contains an immense number of houses, a terrific number of men, women, children, and horses, and a very large share of iniquity. His ignorance of the world and the pitfalls and snares that surround youth, and his stolid determination, in spite of everything, to believe his daughter an innocent woman, until at last the horrible fact becomes too patent to be longer concealed, are amongst the most pleasing traits of his character. This refusal to believe *Dahlia* guilty is also beautifully shown in *Rhoda Fleming*, his other daughter, who nobly battles on behalf of her fallen sister, and devotes her life during the hours of tribulation at the farm to comfort and solace the old man. The contrast between Farmer Fleming and his cunning brother-in-law, Mr. Anthony Hackbut, a porter in a London bank, who delights in deceiving his country relative into the belief that he

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holds some dignified position in Boyne's, and is worth enough sovereigns to buy up Queen Anne's farm twice over, is very artistically worked out. Indeed, the author seems to have made old Hackbut his favourite character, for there is even a greater degree of finish in his portrait than in the others, clever and complete as they all undoubtedly are. The eccentricity of Hackbut is not forced, and no unworthy tricks are resorted to to make him attractive. And this is one of the most commendable features in all Mr. Meredith's writings—he prefers rather to let an interest and affection spring up between his readers and his characters that gradually ripens into admiration, than to invest them with an immediate halo of romance which, nine times out of ten, ends in disgust. He never descends to the low level of those excitement-mongers who make a bloodthirsty black-guard and an unscrupulous villain a hero, nor does he exalt his fallen heroine into an angel more sinned against than sinning. True it is that illness, and penury, and misery are the forerunners of a sincere repentance with Dahlia Fleming, and that one is compelled to feel sympathy for her, but it is the healthy sympathy that suggests, plans, and carries out those excellent midnight meetings of the present day that are such an honour to the metropolis, not any morbid craving after the improper. Her contrition is not exaggerated, and she stands prominently forward as "a warning to deter," rather than an example to imitate—and when, at the close of the story, she resolutely refuses to marry her repentant

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seducer, and determines to devote the remainder of her life to pious and good deeds, the author has shown his desire to paint life in its true colours, and not to adopt the orthodox system of marrying off the principal actors without any respect to decency or probability.

Robert Eccles and his father Jonathan are two more characters that must be signalled out for special mention. The former is not only vigorously conceived, but Mr. Meredith never introduces him without creating for him some highly dramatic situation. Thus, for instance, when the quiet, sedate young apprentice at Queen Anne's farm suddenly reveals himself in his true colours to Rhoda Fleming, at a moment when disgrace has come upon the family, when he pleads his love and is met with a coldness that would have chilled one of less firm a disposition, the author could not have conceived a more striking point had he been desirous of writing the most telling situation of a domestic drama. There is a great deal that is lovable about Robert Eccles, despite his weakness for drink and his general reckless conduct. Something in him reminds one of Mr. Jefferson's able delineation of Rip Van Winkle ; and if the novel had appeared later, Mr. Meredith might possibly have been told that he had taken the clever American actor as a model. Jonathan Eccles plays a subordinate part, but he never comes upon the stage without impressing the reader with his life-like ideality. A few of the more prominent characters only have been dealt with in

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this notice, though each one is well deserving of separate framing. There will be many probably who will complain of the occasional difficulty in following the thread of the story. This is the author's weak point, which no doubt in future works will entirely disappear. His fancy is so prolific, his humour so genuine, and his command of language so great that he gives rein to his pen, and goes bounding along, carrying his reader with him until he suddenly finds "a check," and has to retrace his steps to pick up "the secret." But when found he starts off again, and one of the best of his many admirable points is that he never stumbles into the dulness of ditch water, or rushes at a gate whose bars are the cardinal vices. In these days of murder, bigamy, forgery, and bastardy his book comes like a fresh, healthy, invigorating breeze from the country, and any minor faults that it may contain will be cheerfully forgiven on account of the honest enthusiasm and the vigorous style in which he depicts scenes of English country life. It is true that he does not make a fast young lady push any one down a well, that strychnine and nux vomica are not introduced into any of his pages, and that bigamy is only administered in a very small dose indeed; but, for all that, "Rhoda Fleming" never flags in interest, and it may be added—what can be said of few novels—that many a profitable lesson may be learnt from its perusal. Mr. Meredith may be cordially congratulated on having produced a story with so few blemishes and so many excellent qualities.



VITTORIA



XIII

THE SATURDAY REVIEW

ON

VITTORIA

[From *The Saturday Review*, vol. 23, No. 588, pp. 149-150, February 2, 1867.]

IT is a somewhat difficult task to give a fair review of a book in which there is apparently a wide disproportion between the expenditure of ability and the result obtained. In the not uncommon case where the popularity of an author exceeds what would seem to be his due, the critic cannot but feel a certain diffidence ; he may be demolishing a wind-bag, but, on the other hand, he may be merely giving another example of the occasional inferiority of the cultivated to the popular judgment. Contemporary reviews of Keats and Wordsworth still unpleasantly shake the general belief in critical infallibility. In the reverse case the task is less invidious. A compliment thrown away can at any rate do no harm ; but there is still an unpleasant sensation that there must be some undiscovered flaw in the criticism. It is the exception for a writer to display much ability in any direction

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without obtaining a fair amount of recognition, and it is therefore incumbent upon any one who asserts the existence of talent which has failed of due appreciation to point out the circumstances to which the failure is due. This is a short statement of the duty we have to discharge to Mr. Meredith. There can be no mistake either as to his abilities, or as to his failure in obtaining a corresponding place in popular esteem. In "Vittoria," which is just republished from the *Fortnightly Review*, he has shown as much power of thought and style as would fit out a dozen writers of sensation novels. There is scarcely a page in which there is not evidence of originality, and, what is much rarer, of conscientious labour, often skilfully applied. The conversations, instead of being the slipshod collections of says-he's and says-she's with which most novelists eke out their narrow materials, are only too pointed and vigorous for the interlocutors. Almost every character stands out distinctly and forcibly; some show great originality of conception. The descriptions, again, of natural scenery are really picturesque and compact, instead of being diluted verbiage spun out at random. Yet, with all these merits, and we might conscientiously speak of others, we fear that Mr. Meredith's novel has the unmistakable fault of being hard to read. It is often so clever as to be on the verge of genius, but somehow we don't get on with it. It is a succession of brilliancies which are never fused into a brilliant whole; and it is cram full of smart sayings which have an awkward way of just stopping short

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of the intelligible. We have, in short, that unpleasant sensation which is sometimes produced by the talk of a very clever man who wants to be a little cleverer still, who overstrains himself in the effort to be exceedingly smart, and ends by talking something which neither he nor his company quite understand, which simple persons assume to be wonderful because it is not quite intelligible, and which nobody finds to be genuinely entertaining.

The first thing which strikes the reader, in considering this phenomenon, is the curious nature of Mr. Meredith's style. It gives us the impression of prose striving to be poetry. It has the compressions, the odd turns, and sometimes almost the rhythm of poetry, though it never quite gets its feet off the ground. To quote a few sentences almost at random, a man is described as "flashing a white fist and thumping the long projection of his knee with a wolfish aspect." With an imperceptible change this might be a fragment of blank verse. A woman lifted over a precipice "felt the saving hold of her feet plucked from her, with all the sinking horror, and bit her underlip, as if keeping in the scream with bare stitches." Then we are told that "the pale spiked dialogue broke, not to be revived"; we hear of a "spirit writhing in the serpent coil of fiery blushes"; or are informed concerning a gentleman who had good reasons for feeling that the hours passed slowly, that "the face of time had been imaged like the withering masque of a corpse to him." These sentences may perhaps read, in their

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detached shape, something like the ordinary fine writing of inferior novelists ; but in fact they are genuine attempts to express something forcibly, and seem to be natural in Mr. Meredith. The only fault we find with them is that they imply an effort to put more into a quiet prose sentence than it can contain, with the natural result of making it cramped and uncomfortable. A similar defect may be traced in Mr. Meredith's dialogues. As we have said, they are never trivial or commonplace. His characters do not talk, as Mr. Trollope's so often contrive to do, down half a page in asking for a cup of tea or a railway-ticket. But their smart sayings are so full of epigram and hidden allusion and indirect satire that we often feel a little oppressed by their wisdom, and venture to doubt whether Mr. Meredith quite understands it himself. Here is a bit of the "pale spiked dialogue." Some one mentions, with a hidden sarcasm, that bullfinches should be fed on grapes before singing. Another replies :—

" 'To make them exhibit the results, you withdraw the benefit suddenly, of course?'

" 'We imitate the general run of Fortune's gifts as much as we can,' said Merthyr.

" 'That is the training for little shrill parrots ; we have none in Italy,' Laura sighed, mock dolefully ; 'I fear the system would fail among us.'

" 'It certainly would not build Como villas,' said Lena.

" 'Laura cast sharp eyes on her pretty face.

" 'It is adapted for caged voices that are required to chirrup to tickle the ears of boors.'"

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We fully admit that this sarcasm is so refined as to be almost beyond us. If we had room for the context, our readers might be quicker; meanwhile we can only mention that it has some reference to an Italian cantatrice who is present. The defect in this writing is obvious; it is laborious, and yet the labour has not been carried far enough. A little less effort might have left it easy; a little more might possibly make it at once polished and intelligible. It is a great mistake, in blacking boots, to leave off just before they begin to shine, for then all the previous labour is thrown away; in literature it seems to be not merely thrown away, but actually prejudicial. The truth seems to be that Mr. Meredith has one of those restless minds which have an ever exaggerated fear of becoming a bore. There is no due repose in his writing; and yet, though he is always bristling with point, he has hardly enough patience to obtain a thoroughly satisfactory result.

When we come to his plot and his characters, a similar weakness appears even more decidedly. The plot is by far the weakest part of the book. We have studied it with due attention, but must confess ourselves baffled. The main design is indeed evident enough. Vittoria is a noble Italian woman with a marvellous voice. She is to give a signal at the opera for the rising in Milan during the troubles of 1849. The signal rather misses fire, owing to a bewildering complication of plots and counterplots, and Vittoria is herself suspected; she is, however,

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loved by a young noble who has joined the conspiracy; and, after a variety of troubles during Charles Albert's struggle against Austria, she marries him. He throws himself into Brescia previously to its bombardment, and shortly after the battle of Novara is captured by an Austrian detachment and shot. Before this point is reached there has been a whirl of Italian patriots, spies, and conspirators, of Austrian officers and duchesses, and of English tourists, working out all kinds of complicated schemes, which absolutely makes the brain giddy. To determine who is wanting to do what, at any given moment, is as difficult an intellectual employment as hunting out a railway puzzle in Bradshaw or solving a chess problem. The relations of every one to his or her neighbour depend upon so many delicate strings that we should be quite content to take Mr. Meredith's own account of their purposes. But here he unfortunately fails us; he has evidently studied his own plot so carefully that it probably seems as plain to him as the chess problem would to Mr. Morphy. He can work it, so to speak, without seeing the board; whereas we should require a careful study before we could call to mind the relative action of the pieces. And thus he makes demands upon the attention of his readers of which he is probably not aware. Indeed, he is so familiar with the incidents that he sometimes forgets to make them plain, even when he is relating them. Thus an important scene is described as follows—Rinaldo, we should say, being a conspirator, and presumably

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an assassin, in Austrian hands, and the woman an Italian acquaintance :—

“Then a procession walked some paces on. The woman followed. She fell prostrate at the feet of Count Karl (the Austrian commander). He listened to her and nodded. Rinaldo stood alone with bandaged eyes. The woman advanced to him ; she put her mouth on his ear ; there she hung. Vittoria heard a single shot. Rinaldo lay stretched upon the ground, and the woman stood over him.”

We confess that, after reading this account carefully, we could not make out what had happened. And our perplexity was not quite dispelled until the end of the next volume, in spite of one intermediate explanation. It then turned out that the woman, who was a great admirer of Rinaldo, had shot him by leave of Count Karl, to save him from the shame of execution ; and, further, that this benevolent action had been imposed upon her by her husband, who was a great conspirator, as a punishment for having previously disobeyed him in helping Rinaldo to escape. Now this is a dramatic incident, and one which, in the hands of many writers, would have led up to absurd sensational writing. That would doubtless have been objectionable, but it is as unreasonable in a different way to tell the story so that we don't quite know whether it has happened or not.

The difficulty thus produced in following Mr. Meredith is aggravated in still another way. The characters, as we have said, are really very clever, and some perhaps deserve a stronger epithet. But

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we must really object to the eccentric way in which they make their exits and their entrances. Some of them are formally introduced to us in the good old-fashioned way, and we feel that it is our own fault if we do not afterwards succeed in identifying them. But others drop in, as it were, accidentally, and the reader is expected to be perfectly familiar with their tastes and peculiarities. Some of them, it seems, have appeared in a former novel of Mr. Meredith's, but that is no justification for spoiling one which should be complete in itself. As we have, we must confess, the misfortune of not being familiar with "Emilia Wyndham," we cannot explain the evident affection with which the author regards certain subordinate actors in the story. Their previous history may be a sufficient justification to Mr. Meredith himself, but it is an artistic fault when the first and second conspirators and all the mere walking gentlemen are portrayed with as much care as the hero and heroine. It adds to the distracting effect of the plot, of which we never know very well what is the main thread and what is merely incidental, that we are in equal ignorance as to the relative importance of the characters. The interest is too much dispersed already by the nature of the story, and this system tends rather to increase the dispersion. With all this fault-finding, however, we must add that the characters are, in our opinion, the strongest point of Mr. Meredith's very clever, though rather unreadable, performance, and that if two or three of them were extracted from the labyrinth in which they are

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placed, and set to turn some simple machinery, they would make a far more interesting story.

We must conclude by one more very obvious though unfavourable piece of criticism; which is, that a writer imposes a great additional burden upon himself when he takes for the scene of his story a country and time with which most of his readers are little familiar, and as to which—to state a far more important objection—his own mind can scarcely be saturated with knowledge up to the proper point. The greater triumphs of fiction are certainly won on ground with which both writers and readers are thoroughly familiar, and it wants no great philosophy to see the reason. Mr. Meredith, already so incomprehensible to the vulgar, can scarcely afford to carry extra weight without absolute necessity.

XIV
GERALDINE ENDSOR JEWSBURY
ON
VITTORIA

[From *The Athenæum*, No. 2052, February 23, 1867, pp. 248-249.]

"VITTORIA" is the continuation of a work by the same author, published some years ago, called "Emilia in England." The same characters are introduced ; but, with the exception of Emilia herself, who is again the heroine, under the name of Vittoria, the leading personages of the former novel are mere accessories to the present story. Wilfred Pole, who was Emilia's lover, and who did not behave very chivalrously, is, as Wilfred Pierson, a lieutenant in the Austrian service, a useful subordinate in the drama. The present novel is the whole drama of the Italian rising in 1848, carried along from its outbreak until the fatal battle of Novara. The work evinces knowledge on the part of the author of Italian life as well as of Italian revolutionary politics. All the documents, letters, intentions, and counter-intentions, of the centres and head-centres of the revolution, seem to have been laid at the author's disposal, and he, to judge

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by the result in his book, must have made a good use of them. The seething and surging of the revolutionary movement are well caught; but the reader is lost in the maze of events, and confused by the movements hither and thither of the excited actors, both Austrian and Italian. There are dramas within dramas; hopes and fears, loves and hatreds, private and political; the movements of armies; "trumpets, alarms, excursions and retreats," battles, single combats, not a few duels,—to say nothing of the histories, tales and reports told by one person to others with the vehemence of intense personality. The personages of the drama, or rather panorama, get incidentally involved in events, which are life or death to the parties concerned, but which have only a slight bearing on the fortunes of the story. Such is Wilfred Pierson's night adventure, when he is forced to enter a house to assist the Austrian lover of an Italian lady to escape from the men who have surrounded the house to kill him as he comes out. No mortal memory can keep in mind the Lauras, the Amalias, the Leckensteins, the Violettas, the Austrians pure and simple, the Austrianized Italians, the prudent Italians, the patriots, the conspirators. Opera politics and intrigues are superadded; for is there not a Signora Irma de Karski, a rival *prima donna*, who hates Vittoria as a woman and a singer! How are human beings with limited faculties to understand all the distracting threads of this unmerciful novel? But, then, by way of compensation, each episode has its own interest, and the most insignificant

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personage has the stamp of being a genuine human being, and not a lay figure. One of the best and most individual portraits is that of Barto Rizzo, the conspirator. He is the type of the man who cares for his own way, and who will sacrifice a cause to his own prejudices ; yet he is honest and energetic, if untractable and perverse, and doing more mischief than good. Luighi, the spy, is also an excellent sketch of a supple Italian, with a turn for roguery, and yet capable of honesty when his heart is touched. The first scene between Luighi and Barto Rizzo is a comedy containing the germs of a tragedy, which is worked out to the sorrowful end. Vittoria has been chosen to make her *début* at La Scala, in an opera written by her lover, Count Carlo Ammiani, which is full of revolutionary meaning, but so veiled that it has passed the Censorship ; but in the end she is to sing a patriotic song, not set down in the libretto, which is to be the signal for the insurrection in Milan. There are signals all over the country, by which the rising is to be simultaneous. All is arranged, and all is going well, when Vittoria recognizes some English visitors, her old English friends, and their brother Wilfred, now an Austrian officer. In her desire to save them from the terror and confusion of the outbreak, she writes a letter of warning to Wilfred, not unlike the famous one sent in the Guy Fawkes conspiracy, and which, according to popular tradition, led to the discovery of the plot. This comes to the knowledge of Barto Rizzo, who takes his own measures to secure the letter, and

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having read it, he denounces Vittoria as a traitress. The rising is put off ; the whole plan is thrown into confusion—some wishing to go on, others to draw back. Signor Antonio Pericles, the Greek fanatic for music, whom the readers of “*Emilia in England*” have met before, institutes a small plot of his own, to have her carried off to an Austrian fortress, where she will be kept safe and out of mischief. There is much complication about this little plot, and it has fibres which extend far and wide, and eventually it has serious results. The Austrian authorities are on the alert, the city is in a ferment. Vittoria appears, carries the house by storm, sings the patriotic song, and, rousing the people to madness, she has to be smuggled out of the city, for the Austrians dare not seize her; but the insurrection that had been planned for that night has collapsed. Vittoria wanders about in the most perplexing manner, finding herself in Turin with Charles Albert, following his army, helping the wounded on the field of battle, carried off once more by the amusing Signor Pericles, whose distraction at the carelessness with which she risks the loss of her voice is a comic relief. She meets her lover, and has an interview with him on a battle-field. Then she is spirited away again—Barto Rizzo doing mischief all the time, and other enemies and false friends working at cross-purposes. There is an excellent and spirited account of the campaign—the brief success, the bright hopes, the final failure. Carlo and Vittoria are married, live together a few happy months, and then in another unsuccessful

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conspiracy Carlo falls—a victim to the insane suspicion of Barto Rizzo. Wilfred Pierson, who has done good service as a patient ass, marries the Austrian lady to whom he was betrothed. Vittoria lives like a heroine, and brings up her young son to be a hero, and the curtain drops on the end of the first Italian deliverance in 1858. The book is well and carefully written, though the affectations of style and speech are many and various. There is an air of effort, which gives a sense of fatigue to the reader, greater even than the marches and counter-marches, the journeys, flights, and returns; but the book is a piece of good and honest hard work. For such as care to hear about the state of Italy and the Italians in the last years of Austrian rule, “Vittoria” will be a book they can read.

THE ADVENTURES OF HARRY
RICHMOND

XV

THE DAILY NEWS

ON

THE ADVENTURES OF HARRY
RICHMOND

[From *The Daily News*, No. 7963, p. 2, November 6, 1871.]

MR. GEORGE MEREDITH'S new novel, "The Adventures of Harry Richmond" (London : Smith, Elder & Co.), is a remarkable book. Deep thoughts all aglow with physical colour, an elliptical power of language which is sometimes betrayed into obscurity, cynicism tempered by a large-hearted sympathy with human failure—these are the usual characteristics of Mr. George Meredith's works; but in "Harry Richmond" he has expressed his genius with unwonted clearness, and, under the guise of a romance, has worked out a careful study in moral physiology. Mr. Roy Richmond inherits kingly vices and kingly graces from a Royal father; had he inherited his father's rank in life he would have outdone him in courtliness and profligacy. There are sparks of chivalry in his nature which redeem some of its mire, but these he probably derived from his mother, who was not Royal. In Andersen's quaint fable the

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inappropriate yearning of the snow-man to the fire-stone is explained at the former's dissolution by the fact of his having had a fire shovel for backbone. "‘That's what moved within him,’ said the yard dog," and what moved within Mr. Roy Richmond was a perverse leaning towards the insignia of a rank that was his by law of blood only. To lord it graciously over his fellow-creatures, to enjoy pleasure by right, to shine, chief gaud in a pageant—such was his ambition, and to it he sacrificed all man's highest nobility. Poets and novelists have delighted in examples of occult sympathy with ancient phases of existence. We are told of gipsy girls trained to luxurious lives who flit from their palace balconies to gain the warmth of the fires that scar green lanes, and we have numerous works of fiction where the finer and more delicate qualities of high lineage lend grace to careers weighed by oppression and disaster ; but Mr. Meredith's idea is as original as it is powerfully expressed. He shows in Roy Richmond the canker of hereditary vices unobscured by the splendour of hereditary pride of place. Inheriting a grand manner and a moral nature decayed to the core, he fares ill in the work-a-day world of simple, manly truth and self-relying toil. There is a scenic glamour in him for most women and for many men, but the reader can criticise the tawdry reality and estimate at its full strength the contrast afforded to it by rough Squire Beltham. These two men, differing as rock and quicksand, are the real heroes of the book. As single studies of character each would have been

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admirable, but brought into direct antagonism they are masterpieces. The vigour of the one delineation never flags, the minute touches that go to make up the other never lose their delicacy. The only blot in the treatment of the old squire is his abrupt departure from the scene. It is as if a window were suddenly shut and a blast of healthy sea air walled out. Such a man's death would have been as characteristic as his life. Ottilia also secedes from the story in an unsatisfactory manner. Her first appearance is brilliant and picturesque—she is an Undine piquant with worldly wit. Carried to the end, she would have been an excellent foil to English Janet Ilchester ; but she is gone as suddenly as if she were in truth a water sprite vanishing in foam, and she only reappears in the last act of the story—a sort of fable of herself—a beneficent shadow whose mission it is to join hands and invoke blessings on the principal character, like the good fairy, beautiful but misty, in a transformation scene. Possibly the author had not the power nor the patience to tell much of this prismatic nature. Ottilia was one of those women whom men love passionately and know very little about. Once in a life a man may see such a face—in lonely glimpses ; hear such a voice—a music broken by long pauses of absence. She creates a tropical storm in his imagination ; he gives her his dreams, thinks he must die for want of her, and lives to take a Janet Ilchester to wife. Janet is of the type most Englishmen desire to have their wives, although human weakness may lead their erring

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fancy towards an Ottilia. We have no space to dilate on Janet's excellently drawn if not super-attractive portrait, nor to do more than hint of the exquisite sketch of the gipsy Kiomi. The book abounds in varied and incisive descriptions of character. Not a page can be read carelessly; its profound philosophy, its almost excess of subtlety command attention and generate thought, while the sensitiveness to nature's beauties which vibrates like a passion throughout the work, and the deep underglow of its human sympathy, complete the attractions of a book in every sense remarkable.

XVI

RICHARD HOLT HUTTON

ON

THE ADVENTURES OF HARRY RICHMOND

[From *The Spectator*, vol. 45, No. 2273, pp. 79-80, January 20, 1872.]

THIS book shows originality, wealth of conception, genius, and not a little detailed knowledge of the world; the outline of the tale is bold and flowing, and the individual figures are painted with considerable, though unequal skill; some of the scenes are full of force of a very unusual kind, and some are touched with a real delicacy and tenderness; and yet it would be far truer to say that it has the stuff for half-a-dozen first-rate novels in it, than that it is a first-rate novel itself. It wants, in the first instance, movement, stream, current, narrative-flow, and secondly, something of ease and simplicity of style. We are late in reviewing it, but, to say the truth, it is a novel which invites delay rather than prompts rapidity. In spite of its animation and its fullness of life, it is very slow reading, for more than one reason. There is an allusiveness and occasionally

also an affectation of affluent expressiveness about the manner of the author which are provoking, and induce one to throw the book aside for a time from vexation at its assumption. But this is not the principal reason for the manifold retardations with which the reader meets. These are mainly due to the diminishing instead of the increasing interest of the tale as it proceeds, and the want of clear relation between the different parts of it. The enormous expansion of the social finesse in the least interesting part, and, perhaps above all, the little sympathy we have with the hero of the autobiography who is the connecting-thread of the whole, and who, instead of making us feel eager about his future, is always giving us a foretaste of something uncomfortable and embarrassing, destroy our interest in the development. Nor is that strong disposition to postpone the next chapter, which is due to the hero's uncomfortable complexities of inconsistent obligation, in any way overcome by the strength of the sympathy one is made to feel for either of the two young ladies between whom he is so good as to divide his affection with perplexing equality. One of them (Ottilia), indeed, is a beautiful picture, full of clear intellectual grace and tender intensity ; but then she is a German princess, and so much is made of her position and of the disastrous character of the *mésalliance* she is willing to enter into, that she stands almost aloof from the story, and you hardly know whether she herself does not wish for some imperious call of duty to break off the engagement ; certainly there

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is no glimpse given us, during the long period of her lover's absence, of any feeling in her which tends to make the reader eager for a happy solution of the difficulties of the situation. She descends from the clouds, as it were, whenever the hero is in some worse than usual trouble, to shed her benign affection over him; but the condescension is made so much of, and her retirement behind the veil of the royal caste is so complete while it lasts, that one cannot catch the smallest possible impatience for the issue from the picture of her gracious tenderness and her deep but perfectly self-restrained and almost self-condemned devotedness; rather do we feel disposed to shrink the more from the issue, feeling a distinct prevision of its uncomfortable character. As for the other young lady (Janet Ilchester), we never know her well enough to feel much interest in the development of what, in her too, presents itself, with less intelligible reason, as a curiously self-contained and sedate affection. There seems to be a real want of consistency too between the rather repulsive picture of her as a child, a picture which makes her somewhat sly and very selfish, and the picture of her perfect courage and indomitable resolution as a woman; we do not say that the two pictures might not be reconciled, but only that they *are* not,—that the graduated shades between them are not supplied, and that her love for the hero is so very imperfectly painted, that it is hardly possible to feel any sympathy with her till within a very few pages of the close. Thus Harry Richmond, the hero himself,

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being radically uninteresting, and his career full of moral awkwardness of that particular kind which slightly repel instead of exciting the wistful interest of the reader, and as the story of neither of the heroines with whom he falls in love supplies in any degree the predominant fascination in which he himself is so deficient, we are left to the extraordinary cleverness of the conceptions of the tale itself to supply the want of current in the plot,—a very poor substitute, if only on this account, that these conceptions are full of complexity and finesse which rather exhaust the attention when made the principal interests, instead of the mere by-play, of a narrative otherwise full of forward movement and vivid interest.

The main intention of the story is to sketch the influence of the hollow conceit of great descent on the mind of the hero's father, Roy Richmond (supposed to be the son of a Royal Duke who had married privately without acknowledging his marriage), a man full of tact and resource and social ambition (of the poorer kind),—a charlatan, in fact, of a large and skilful and loveable sort, with every gift except those which would make him ashamed of playing the actor all his life, and especially of playing the actor all his life for so trivial a prize as the reluctant recognition of his birth by society and the Government;—and especially to sketch this unreal kind of genius for social magnificence, in direct contrast to the solid earthly character of a rich, positive, passionate, swearing old English squire, — the hero's grandfather, Squire Beltham,

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whose daughter Mr. Roy Richmond has married against the Squire's will. Between these contrasted personages, father and grandfather, an internecine war for the leading influence over the hero's body and soul goes on from the first page to the last of the book. We cannot say that so far as the stage of these contending influences is laid in the mind of young Harry Richmond we care very much for the issue,—at least, after the stage of boyhood is past, a period during which the picture of the struggle is drawn with great power and effect. But the contrast between the airy, grandiose, strategic genius of the hare-brained, but half-loveable charlatan and castle-builder, with his magnificent belief in his own destiny, his really grand play of fancy, and his almost disinterested dreams of a great career for his son, and the coarse, warm-hearted, violent, narrow, successful old English squire, “acred up to his lips, consollid up to his chin,” and distinguished in his class by the real lucidity of his business mind, and therefore possessed with a double intensity of loathing for the hollow, scheming, and visionary pretensions of his son-in-law, is drawn from beginning to end with marvellous power. The two scenes in which their first and last battles are fought at the very opening of the first volume and towards the close of the third are scenes of strange vigour; and if connected together by a plot half as good as are several of the links in it, they would have been remembered amongst some of the best things in English literature. But, as we have intimated, young

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Harry Richmond, after he has passed the boyhood stage, is not drawn with any real power, while the vast detail in which his father's faculty for social intrigue and the construction of a grand plot is developed, though full of cleverness, becomes utterly wearisome before the close. If a little of the minuteness of study spent upon this no doubt very original, but still exhaustible conception, had been devoted to Janet Ilchester, the story might have been vastly improved, both by subtraction and by addition—by taking away from the superfluity of an over-developed idea, and by remedying the deficiency of a figure very imperfectly conceived and drawn. Neither Mr. Richmond nor Squire Beltham,—unquestionably the great figures of the piece,—can be fairly illustrated by any extract we have space to give ; but the mode in which the would-be royal charlatan first acquired his ascendancy over his son's mind is so finely painted, and that, too, within limits possible to a newspaper, that we will illustrate it by giving the young man's recollections of his father's method of exciting in him as a child intense interest in the grander episodes of English literature and history :—

“He was never away on the Sunday. Both of us attired in our best, we walked along the streets hand in hand ; my father led me before the cathedral monuments, talking in a low tone of British victories, and commending the heroes to my undivided attention. I understood very early that it was my duty to imitate them. While we remained in the cathedral he talked of glory and Old England, and dropped his voice in the middle of a murmured chant to

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introduce Nelson's name or some other great man's: and this recurred regularly. 'What are we for now?' he would ask me as we left our house. I had to decide whether we took a hero or an author, which I soon learnt to do with capricious resolution. We were one Sunday for Shakspeare; another for Nelson or Pitt. 'Nelson, papa,' was my most frequent rejoinder, and he never dissented, but turned his steps towards Nelson's cathedral-dome, and uncovered his head there, and said: 'Nelson, then, to-day;' and we went straight to his monument to perform the act of homage. I chose Nelson in preference to the others because, towards bed-time in the evening, my father told me stories of our hero of the day, and neither Pitt nor Shakspeare lost an eye, or an arm, or fought with a huge white bear on the ice to make themselves interesting. I named them occasionally out of compassion, and to please my father, who said that they ought to have a turn. They were, he told me, in the habit of paying him a visit, whenever I had particularly neglected them, to learn the grounds for my disregard of their claims, and they urged him to intercede with me, and imparted many of their unpublished adventures, so that I should be tempted to give them a chance on the following Sunday. 'Great Will,' my father called Shakspeare, and 'Slender Billy,' Pitt. The scene where Great Will killed the deer, dragging Falstaff all over the park after it by the light of Bardolph's nose, upon which they put an extinguisher if they heard any of the keepers, and so left everybody groping about and catching the wrong person, was the most wonderful mixture of fun and tears. Great Will was extremely youthful, but everybody in the park called him 'Father William;' and when he wanted to know which way the deer had gone, King Lear (or else my memory deceives me) punned, and Lady Macbeth waved a handkerchief for it to be steeped in the

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blood of the deer; Shylock ordered one pound of the carcase; Hamlet (I cannot say why, but the fact was impressed on me) offered him a three-legged stool; and a number of kings and knights and ladies lit their torches from Bardolph; and away they flew, distracting the keepers and leaving Will and his troop to the deer. That poor thing died from a different weapon at each recital, though always with a flow of blood and a successful dash of his antlers into Falstaff; and to hear Falstaff bellow! But it was mournful to hear how sorry Great Will was over the animal he had slain. He spoke like music. I found it pathetic in spite of my knowing that the whole scene was lighted up by Bardolph's nose. When I was just bursting out crying—for the deer's tongue was lolling out and quick pantings were at his side; he had little ones at home—Great Will remembered his engagement to sell Shylock a pound of the carcase; determined that no Jew should eat of it, he bethought him that Falstaff could well spare a pound, and he said the Jew would not see the difference; Falstaff only got off by hard running and roaring out that he knew his unclean life would make him taste like pork and thus let the Jew into the trick. My father related all this with such a veritable matter-of-fact air, and such liveliness—he sounded the chase and its cries, and showed King Lear tottering, and Hamlet standing dark, and the vast substance of Falstaff—that I followed the incidents excitedly, and really saw them, which was better than understanding them. I required some help from him to see that Hamlet's offer of a three-legged stool at a feverish moment of the chase was laughable. He taught me what to think of it by pitching Great Will's voice high, and Hamlet's very low. By degrees I got some unconscious knowledge of the characters of Shakspeare. There never was so fascinating a father as mine for a boy anything

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under eight or ten years old. He could guess on Saturday whether I should name William Pitt on the Sunday; for, on those occasions, 'Slender Billy,' as I hope I am not irreverent in calling him, made up for the dulness of his high career with a raspberry-jam tart, for which, my father told me solemnly, the illustrious Minister had in his day a passion. If I named him, my father would say, 'W. P., otherwise S. B., was born in the year so-and-so; now,' and he went to the cupboard, 'in the name of Politics, take this and meditate upon him.' The shops being all shut on Sunday, he certainly bought it, anticipating me unerringly, on the Saturday, and, as soon as the tart appeared, we both shouted. I fancy I remember his repeating a couplet,

'Billy Pitt took a cake and a raspberry-jam,
'When he heard they had taken Seringapatam.'

At any rate, the rumour of his having done so at periods of strong excitement led to the inexplicable display of foresight on my father's part."

That is full of a humour that one regards as almost too great to be compatible with a mind so inflated with grandiose dreams as that of the would-be royal adventurer; but it is one of the most delicate feats of ability in the book to make us feel how much of true humour and nobility there is combined with Mr. Roy Richmond's theatrical, pageant-loving character, and rather ignoble aims. It is impossible to think of him without his charlatanerie, and yet it is impossible to think of him as not possessing qualities both intellectual and emotional too good for his charlatan schemes,—and this, notwithstanding that

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he himself never seems to have the shadow of a distrust of his own aims from the beginning to the close of his ambitious career. So completely is the man a quasi-royal adventurer, a patron who needs very substantial help, a Grand Seigneur who has to depend for his hopes on more solidly established Grands Seigneurs, a man whose every gift, whose elasticity, whose willingness to stoop in order to soar the better in future, are manufactured, as it were, to suit his dreams and hopes, that we are hardly able from the beginning to the end to conceive of any intellectual or moral nature in the man independently of the part he is acting. That he loves his son thoroughly, and the woman who renounced him for her sister's sake, is clear; that he can see the absurd side of other people's littlenesses is clear also; but that he could have any intellectual conviction, or moral conviction, or political conviction outside of the exigencies of his part in life, seems almost impossible. It need hardly be observed that the conception of such a character is very original, and that the insanity in which the author makes it terminate, when the bubble bursts, is most truly as well as finely conceived. Had but our author spared us half the detail!

Besides the great charlatan and the great English squire, there is much in the story to show the author's talent. There are even delicate touches here and there,—like that which represents the Princess Ottilia as recurring to the imperfect English of her childhood's first acquaintance with Harry Richmond, when

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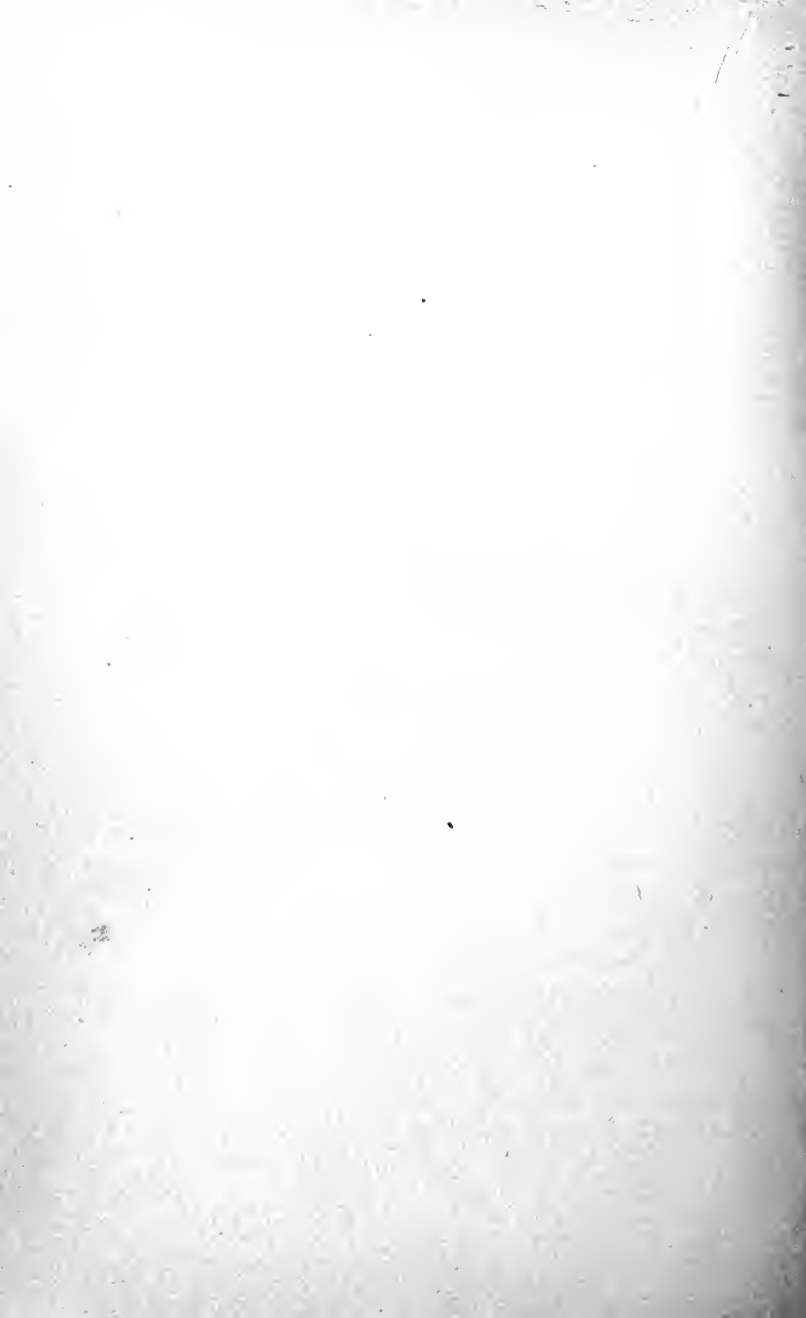
she asks him, after his declaration of love, whether he can be patient, and adds, with tender humour, in the precise form of her former childish stiffness, "It is my question;" and again, like that which makes the poor old pretender to royal blood recall, when all his schemes are in ruins, his promise to his old housekeeper that she should have a memorial erected to her by his hand, and mutter to himself, "Waddy shall have her monument." These delicacies of delineation are not very common in the book, but the few there are are touches of real genius. Nor must we forget, in enumerating the finer elements of the book, the exquisite episode of the child's runaway adventure with the gipsy girl Kiomi,—a picture almost as faithful and as full of colour and humour as any to be found in modern literature.

On the other hand, as we have said, the book has great faults. There is a great exuberance of dull, protracted, social intrigue, and a terrible flatness about the hero himself. But worst of all is the want of simplicity of style and the frequently false and disagreeable turns given to expression, as when the child remembers of his schoolmaster's daughter to whom he had been talking of her young lover, "she laughed and *mouthed me over* with laughing kisses;" or again, when he is falling in love with the Princess Ottilia, and in answer to a remark of hers he is moved to declare his passion, but does not, a state of feeling which he thus expresses:—
"*Something moved my soul to lift wings*, but the

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passion sank." There are plenty of illustrations of this love of affectation in the style, and still more of an apparently affected obscurity of manner, which tend to spoil a novel containing the evidence of really great powers.

BEAUCHAMP'S CAREER



XVII

JAMES THOMSON

ON

BEAUCHAMP'S CAREER

[From *Cope's Tobacco Plant*, vol. i., No. 75, p. 910, June, 1876.]

AS most of our readers are doubtless aware, this novel first appeared in the *Fortnightly Review*. The hero is a young naval officer of good birth, who turns Radical, contests an election, writes and lectures, to the great disgust and annoyance of his kinsfolk and friends, and to his own sore discomfort. We have, therefore, keen-witted remarks from persons of all shades of opinion on the state of the country, our national defences, the various political parties, the Church, the press, the aristocracy, the middle class, and the people. But our author is not the man to let his personages be lost in the quagmire of politics. Most enthusiasts exercise a special fascination over women ; and when an enthusiast is young, handsome, gallant, well-born and well-bred, the fascination is prodigious. So we have the story of Nevil Beauchamp's loves and love-perplexities told as none but George Meredith could tell it, with marvellous

James Thomson on Beauchamp's Career

subtleties of insight and expression, and framed in scenes such as he alone can suggest in a few swift words instinct with spirit and luminous with beauty. His books are not popular, being at once too abstrusely thoughtful and too waywardly humoristic for the vulgar; and this one our ladies vehemently condemn for its miserable catastrophe; but we can cordially commend it and all his works to the meditative smoker, who grudgeth not several slow whiffs over a knotty point when the knot is really worth untying for the sake of that which it involves. Nor will his sacred calm be perturbed by the bitter speech of a married lady: "Two men in this house would give their wives for pipes, if it came to the choice. We might all go for a cellar of old wine. After forty, men have married their habits, and wives are only an item in the list, and not the most important." Nor will he fear that when his last breath is exhaled it shall be said of his relict, as of Louise Devereux: "She was married to a pipe; she's the widow of Tobacco-ash."

XVIII

JAMES THOMSON

ON

BEAUCHAMP'S CAREER

[This article originally appeared in *The Secularist*, June 3, 1876, pp. 364-367, over the well-known initials "B. V." A portion of it was reprinted, with slight variations, in "Essays and Phantasies," Reeves and Turner, 1881, pp. 289-295, under the title, "A Note on George Meredith (On the occasion of 'Beauchamp's Career')," see footnote on p. 179.].

MR. MEREDITH stands among our living novelists much as Robert Browning until of late years stood among our living poets, quite unappreciated by the general public, ranked with the very highest by a select few. One exception must be made to this comparison, an exception decidedly in favour of the novelists and novel-readers ; for whereas Tennyson, the public's greatest poet, is immeasurably inferior to Browning in depth and scope and power and subtlety of intellect, George Eliot, the public's greatest novelist, is equal in all these qualities, save perhaps the last, to her unplaced rival, while having the advantage in most deservedly popular qualities, and the clear disadvantage in but one, the faculty of describing vigorous or agonistic action.

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The thoughtful few have succeeded in so far imposing their judgment of Browning upon the thoughtless many, that these and their periodical organs now treat him with great respect, and try hard to assume the appearance of understanding and enjoying him, though doubtless their awkward admiration is more genuine in the old sense of wonder or astonishment than in the modern of esteem or love. But the thoughtful few are still far from succeeding to this extent in the case of George Meredith. Even literary men are unfamiliar with him. For having in some freak of fun or irony specified only two of his other books, and these among the earliest, on his title-page; leaving etc. to represent "Farina," "Evan Harrington," "The Adventures of Harry Richmond," "Modern Love, and other Poems," with his masterpieces, "Emilia in England" and its sequel "Vittoria"; he has reaped the satisfaction of learning that many of his well-informed reviewers manifestly know nothing of these obscure writings. For the rest, the causes of his unpopularity are obvious enough, and he himself, as he more than once lets us know, is thoroughly aware of them. Thus he interjects in the present work (III. 218-9):—

"We will make no mystery about it. I would I could. Those happy tales of mystery are as much my envy as the popular narratives of the deeds of bread and cheese people, for they both create a tide-way in the attentive mind; the mysterious pricking our credulous flesh to creep, the familiar urging our obese imagination to continual exercise. And oh, the refreshment there is in dealing with characters

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either contemptibly beneath us or supernaturally above ! My way is like a Rhone island in the summer drought, stony, unattractive and difficult between the two forceful streams of the unreal and the over-real which delight mankind—honour to the conjurors ! My people conquer nothing, win none ; *they are actual, yet uncommon. It is the clockwork of the brain that they are directed to set in motion, and—poor troop of actors to vacant benches !—the conscience residing in thoughtfulness which they would appeal to ;* and if you are there impervious to them, we are lost : back I go to my wilderness, where, as you perceive, I have contracted the habit of listening to my own voice more than is good."

Not only does he appeal to the conscience residing in thoughtfulness ; he makes heavy and frequent demands on the active imagination,—monstrous attempts at extortion which both the languid and the sentimental novel-reader bitterly resent, and which indeed if they grew common with authors (luckily there is not the slightest fear of that !) would soon plunge the circulating libraries into bankruptcy. The late Charles Dickens, who coincided at all points with the vulgar taste as exactly as the two triangles of the fourth proposition of the first book of "Euclid" with one another, carried to perfection the Low-Dutch or exhaustive style of description, which may be termed artistic painting reduced to artful padding, minutely cataloguing all the details, with some exaggeration or distortion, humorous or pathetic, of each to make them more memorable ; so that every item can be checked and verified as in an auctioneer's inventory, which is satisfactory

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to a business-like people. George Eliot with incomparably higher art paints rich and solid pictures that fill the eye and dwell in the mind. But George Meredith seldom does this, either in the realm of Nature or in that of Humanity, though the achievement is well within his power, as none of our readers can doubt who studied, being fit to study, those magnificent selections from his "Vittoria" in the *Secularist* (No. 10, March 4) entitled "Portrait of Mazzini" and "Mazzini and Italy." He loves to suggest by flying touches rather than slowly elaborate. To those who are quick to follow his suggestions he gives in a few winged words the very spirit of a scene, the inmost secret of a mood or passion, as no other living writer I am acquainted with can. His name and various passages in his works reveal Welsh blood, more swift and fiery and imaginative than the English. And he says in the "Emilia," with fair pride of race: "All subtle feelings are discerned by Welsh eyes when untroubled by any mental agitation. Brother and sister were Welsh, and I may observe that there is human nature and Welsh nature." If his personages are not portrayed at full length, they are clear and living in his mind's eye, as we discern by the exquisitely appropriate gesture or attitude or look in vivid moments: and they are characterised by an image or a phrase, as when we are told that a profile of Beauchamp "suggested an arrow-head in the up-flight;" and of Renée: "her features had the soft irregularities which run to rarities of beauty, as the ripple rocks the light;

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mouth, eyes, brows, nostrils, and bloomy cheeks played into one another liquidly; thought flew, tongue followed, and the flash of meaning quivered over them like night-lightning. Or oftener, to speak truth, tongue flew, thought followed: her age was but newly seventeen, and she was French." And as with the outward so with the interior nature of his personages. Marvellous flashes of insight reveal some of their profoundest secrets, detect the main-springs and trace the movements of their most complex workings, and from such data you must complete the characters, as from certain leading points a mathematician defines a curve. So with his conversations. The speeches do not follow one another mechanically adjusted like a smooth pavement for easy walking: they leap and break, resilient and resurgent, like running foam-crested sea-waves, impelled and repelled and crossed by under-currents and great tides and broad breezes; in their restless agitations you must divine the immense life abounding beneath and around and above them; and the Mudie novice accustomed to saunter the level pavements, finds that the heaving and falling are sea-sickness to a queasy stomach. Moreover he delights in the elaborate analysis of abstruse problems, whose solutions when reached are scarcely less difficult to ordinary apprehension than are the problems themselves; discriminating countless shades where the common eye sees but one gloom or glare, pursuing countless distinct movements where the common eye sees only a whirling perplexity. As

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if all these heavy disqualifications were not enough, as if he were not sufficiently offensive in being original, he dares also to be wayward and wilful, not theatrically or overweeningly like Charles Reade, but freakishly and humoristically, to the open-eyed disgust of our prim public. Lastly, his plots are too carelessly spun to catch our summer flies, showing here great gaps and there a pendent entanglement ; while his catastrophes are wont to outrage that most facile justice of romance which condemns all rogues to poverty and wretchedness and rewards the virtuous with wealth and long life and flourishing large families.

In exposing his defects for the many, I have discovered some of his finest qualities for the thoughtful and imaginative few, and need now only summarise. He has a wonderful eye for form and colour, especially the latter ; a masterly perception of character, a most subtle sense for spiritual mysteries. His dialogue is full of life and reality, flexile and rich in the genuine unexpected, marked with the keenest distinctions, more like the bright-witted French than the slow and clumsy English. He can use brogue and *baragouinage* with rare accuracy and humorous effect ; witness the Irish Mrs. Chump and the Greek Pericles in "Emilia." Though he seldom gives way to it, he is great in the fiery record of fiery action ; thus the duel in the Stelvio Pass, in "Vittoria," has been scarcely equalled by any living novelist save by Charles Reade in that heroic fight with the pirates in "Hard Cash." He has this sure mark of lofty genius, that he always

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rises with his theme, growing more strenuous, more self-contained, more magistral, as the demands on his thought and imagination increase. His style is very various and flexible, flowing freely in whatever measures the subject and the mood may dictate. At its best it is so beautiful in simplest Saxon, so majestic in rhythm, so noble with noble imagery, so pregnant with meaning, so vital and intense, that it must be ranked among the supreme achievements of our literature. A dear friend said well when reading "Vittoria": Here truly are words that if you pricked them would bleed. For integral grandeur and originality of conception, and for perfectness of execution, the heroine of his "Emilia" appears to me the sovereign character of our modern fiction: in her he has discovered a new great nature, whom he has endowed with a new great language. In fine, I am aware of no other living English writer so gloriously gifted and so little known and appreciated except Garth Wilkinson.*

These general remarks, a poor tribute of gratitude for many hours of exquisite delight, which I could not refrain from tendering when opportunity

* In "Essays and Phantasies" this article breaks off here and concludes with the following sentence:—

"In fine, I am aware of no other living English writer so gloriously gifted and so little known and appreciated except Garth Wilkinson: and Garth Wilkinson has squandered his superb genius in most futile efforts to cultivate the spectral Sahara of Swedenborgianism, and, infinitely worse, the Will-o'-the-wisp Slough of Despond of Spiritism; while George Meredith has constantly devoted himself to the ever-fruitful fields of real living Nature and Human Nature."

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offered, have left me but scant space for special notice of George Meredith's last work ; which, like the "Vittoria," first appeared in the *Fortnightly*. Nevil Beauchamp is a gallant young naval officer, well-born and well-bred, who after service in the Crimea, on the west coast of Africa and elsewhere, comes home a radical reformer. He has been greatly influenced by the works of Carlyle, and now experiences the personal influence of a Carlylesque Dr. Shrapnel, one of the best and kindest of men, hated and feared by all Whig and Tory respectabilities as a firebrand of revolution and anarchy. Beauchamp fights an election for a very corrupt constituency (Bevisham, which appears to mean Southampton), is beaten, and takes to lecturing and writing for the people. His political career may have been partly suggested by that of Admiral Maxse, to whom, being then captain, George Meredith "affectionately inscribed" his volume of Poems fourteen years back. Beauchamp, a fascinating enthusiast, with spiritual affinities to Shelley, is not so absorbed in politics as to be free from the grand passion ; and the story of his loves in their ravelling and unravelling is the artistic glory of the book, where it must be read at full length to be appreciated. The *Secularist* must concern itself rather with the political and social sketches and discussions, which are full of keen wit and independent thought. I regret that there is space only for some brief extracts. How true is this !—

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"Corn Law Repeal, the Manchester flood, before which time Whigs were, since which they have walked like spectral antediluvians, or floated as dead canine bodies that are sucked away on the ebb of tides and flung back on the flow, ignorant whether they be progressive or retrograde."

Here is a morning view of Mr. Timothy Turbot, Irish orator and journalist, attached to Liberalism and devoted to Whisky:—

"Beauchamp beheld a middle-sized round man, with loose lips and pendant indigo jowl, whose eyes twinkled watery, like pebbles under the shore-wash, and whose neck-band needed an extra touch from fingers other than his own."

Tim looks on politics like the philosopher he is:—

"Politics, Commander Beauchamp, involves the doing of lots of disagreeable things to ourselves and our relations; it's positive. I'm a soldier of the Great Campaign [Anti-Corn-Law]: and who knows it better than I, sir? It's climbing the greasy pole for the leg o' mutton, that makes the mother's heart ache for the jacket and the nether garments she mended neatly, if she didn't make them. Mutton or no mutton, there's grease for certain!"

Equally philosophical are his views of candidates:—

"Well, commander, well, sir, they say a candidate's to be humoured in his infancy, for *he* has to do all the humouring before he's many weeks old at it; only there's

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the fact—he soon finds out he has to pay for his first fling, like the son of a family sowing his oats to reap his Jews . . . The address was admirably worded, sir, I make bold to say it to your face ; but most indubitably it threatened powerful drugs for weak stomachs, and it blew cold on votes, which are sensitive plants like nothing else in botany . . . I repeat, my dear sir, I repeat, the infant candidate delights in his honesty, like the babe in its nakedness, the beautiful virgin in her innocence. So he does, but he discovers it's time to wear clothes in a contested election. And what's that but to preserve the outlines pretty correctly, whilst he doesn't shock and horrify the sight? A dash of conventionalism makes the whole civilised world kin, ye know—that's the truth. You must appear to be one of them for them to choose you."

Nevil Beauchamp quotes Dr. Shrapnel on the Tories :—

"He compares them to geese claiming possession of the whole common, and hissing at every foot of ground they have to yield. They're always having to retire and always hissing. 'Retreat and menace,' that's the motto for them."

Nevil speaks of the clergymen of our very dear State Church :—

"The Protestant parson is the policeman set to watch over the respectability of the middle-class. He has sharp eyes for the sins of the poor. As for the rich, they support his church ; they listen to his sermon—to set an example : *discipline*, colonel. You discipline the tradesman, who's

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afraid of losing your custom, and the labourer, who might be deprived of his bread. But the people? It's put down to the wickedness of human nature that the parson has not got hold of the people. The parsons have lost them by senseless Conservatism, because they look to the Tories for the support of their Church, and let the religion run down the gutters. And how many thousands have you at work in the pulpit every Sunday? I'm told the dissenting ministers have some vitality . . . And these thirty or forty thousand call the men that do the work they ought to be doing demagogues. The parsonry are a power absolutely to be counted for waste, as to progress."

This is not a bad observation :—

"Tory and Radical have an eye for one another, which overlooks the Liberal at all times except when he is, as they imagine, playing the game of either of them."

Stukely Culbrett, old Tory and cynic, delivers himself :—

"Look here, Nevil, I beg to inquire what Dr. Shrapnel means by 'the people.' We have in our country the nobles and the squires, and after them, as I understand it, the people: that's to say, the middle-class and the working-class—fat and lean. I'm quite with Shrapnel when he lashes the flesh-pots. They want it, and they don't get it from 'their organ,' the Press. I fancy you and I agree about their organ; the dimmallest organ that ever ground a hackneyed set of songs and hymns to madden the thoroughfares. It's the week-day Parson of the middle-class. They have their thinking done for them as the Chinese have their dancing. But, Nevil,

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your Dr. Shrapnel seems to treat the traders as identical with the aristocrats in opposition to his 'people.' The traders are the cursed middlemen, bad friends of the 'people,' and infernally treacherous to the nobles till money hoists them. It's they who pull down the country. They hold up the nobles to the hatred of the democracy, and the democracy to scare the nobles. One's when they want to swallow a privilege, and the other's when they want to ring-fence their gains."

Dr. Shrapnel writes of our royalty and loyalty and our Church:—

"Where kings lead, it is to be supposed they are wanted. Service is the noble office on earth, and where kings do service let them take the first honours of the State: but the English middle-class, which has absorbed the upper and despises, when it is not quaking before it, the lower, will have nothing above it but a rickety ornament like that you see on a confectioner's twelfth-cake. This loyalty smacks of a terrible perfidy. Pass the lords and squires . . . their hearts are in their holdings! For the loyalty of the rest of the land, it is the shopkeeper's loyalty, which is to be computed by the exact annual sum of his net profits. It is now at high tide. It will last with the prosperity of our commerce. Let commercial disasters come on us, and what of the loyalty now paying its hundreds of thousands, and howling down questioners? In a day of bankruptcies, how much would you bid for the loyalty of a class shivering under deprivation of luxuries, with its god Comfort beggared? Ay, my Beauchamp, ay, when you reflect that fear of the so-called rabble, *i.e.* the people, the unmoneyed class, which knows not Comfort, tastes not of luxuries, is the main component of their noisy

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frigid loyalty, and that the people are not with them but against, and yet that the people might be won by visible forthright kingly service to a loyalty outdoing theirs as the sun the moon ; ay, that the people verily thirst to love and reverence ; and that *their love is the only love worth having*, because it is disinterested love, and endures, and takes heat in adversity,—reflect on it and wonder at the inversion of things ! So with a Church. It lives if it is at home with the poor. In the arms of enriched shopkeepers it rots, goes to decay in vestments—vestments ! flakes of mummy-wraps for it ! or else they use it for one of their political truncheons—to awe the ignorant masses : I quote them. So. Not much ahead of ancient Egyptians in spirituality or in priestcraft ! They call it statesmanship. O for a word for it ! Let Palsy and Cunning go to form a word. *Deadmanship*, I call it.”

The same dreadful Dr. writes of creeds and systems :—

“Professors, prophets, masters, each hitherto has had his creed and system to offer, good mayhap for the term, and each has put it forth for the truth everlasting, to drive the dagger to the heart of time, and put the axe to human growth !—that one circle of wisdom issuing of the experience and needs of their day, should act the despot over all other circles for ever ! . . . The creed that rose in heaven sets below ; and where we had an angel we have cloven-feet and fangs. Ask how that is ! The creed is much what it was when the followers diverged it from the Founder. But humanity is not *where* it was when that creed was food and guidance. Creeds will not die not fighting. We cannot root them up out of us without blood. Ours, my Beauchamp, is the belief that humanity advances

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beyond the limits of creeds, is to be tied to none. We reverence the Master in his teachings; we behold the limits of him in his creed—and that is not his work. We truly are his disciples, who see how far it was in him to do service; not they that make of his creed a strait-jacket for humanity.”

Mr. Blackburn Tuckham, a staunch young Tory, relates part of an interview with Shrapnel:—

“I happened, casually, meaning no harm, and not supposing I was throwing a lighted match on powder, to mention the word Providence. I found myself immediately confronted by Shrapnel—overtopped, I should say . . . He began rocking over me like a poplar in a gale, and cries out: ‘Stay there! away with that! Providence? Can you set a thought on Providence, not seeking to propitiate it? And have you not there the damning proof that you are at the foot of an Idol?’ . . . And he went on with: ‘Ay, invisible,’ and his arm chopping, ‘but an Idol! an Idol!’—I was to think of ‘nought but Laws.’ He admitted there might be one above the Laws. ‘To realise him is to fry the brains in their pan,’ says he, and struck his forehead a slap.”

Let us escape from the heated atmosphere and narrow rooms of controversy, for one large draught of open air in the temple not made with hands. In the “Mazzini” selection we saw how George Meredith portrayed a great man, in the “Mazzini and Italy” how he imaged an almost mortal national agony; let us now see how he pictures nature at her grandest. We have had a noble Titian and a weird

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Rembrandt or Dürer, let us now have a glorious aërial Turner. Nevil Beauchamp and Renée, with her brother and another lady, being in Venice, hire a big Chioggian fishing-boat to sail into the gulf at night, and return at dawn, and have sight of Venice rising from the sea :—

“He was at first amazed by the sudden exquisite transition. Tenderness breathed from her, in voice, in look, in touch! for she accepted his help that he might lead her to the stern of the vessel, to gaze well on setting Venice, and sent lightnings up his veins; she leaned beside him over the vessel's rails, not separated from him by the breadth of a fluttering riband. Like him, she scarcely heard her brother when for an instant he intervened, and with Nevil she said adieu to Venice, where the faint red Doge's palace was like the fading of another sunset north-westward of the glory along the hills, Venice dropped lower and lower, breasting the waters, until it was a thin line in air. The line was broken, and ran in dots, with here and there a pillar standing on opal sky. At last the topmost campanile sank.

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“The breeze blew steadily, enough to swell the sails and sweep the vessel on smoothly. The night air dropped no moisture on deck.

“Nevil Beauchamp dozed for an hour. He was awakened by light on his eyelids, and starting up beheld the many pinnacles of grey and red rocks and shadowy high white regions at the head of the gulf waiting for the sun; and the sun struck them. One by one they came out in crimson flame, till the vivid host appeared to have stepped forward. The shadows on the snow-fields

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deepened to purple below an irradiation of rose and pink and dazzling silver. There of all the world you might imagine gods to sit. A crown of mountains endless in range, erect, or flowing, shattered and arid, or leaning in smooth lustre, hangs above the gulf. The mountains are sovereign Alps, and the sea is beneath them. The whole gigantic body keeps the sea, as with a hand, to right and left.

“Nevil's personal rapture craved for Renée with the second long breath he drew ; and now the curtain of her tent-cabin parted, and greeting him with half a smile, she looked out. The Adriatic was dark, the Alps had heaven to themselves. Crescents and hollows, rosy mounds, white shelves, shining ledges, domes and peaks, all the towering heights were in illumination from Friuli into farthest Tyrol ; beyond earth to the stricken sense of the gazers. Colour was steadfast on the massive front ranks ; it wavered in the remoteness, and was quick and dim as though it fell on beating wings ; but there too divine colour seized and shaped forth solid forms, and thence away to others in uttermost distances where the incredible flickering gleam of new heights arose, that soared, or stretched their white uncertain curves in sky like wings traversing infinity.

“It seemed unlike morning to the lovers, but as if night had broken with a revelation of the kingdom in the heart of night. While the broad smooth waters rolled unlighted beneath that transfigured upper sphere, it was possible to think the scene might vanish like a view caught out of darkness by lightning. Alp over burning Alp, and around them a hueless dawn !”

THE EGOIST



XIX
WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY
ON
THE EGOIST

[From *The Academy*, No. 394, New Issue, p. 369, November 22, 1879.]

IN "The Egoist" the author of "Harry Richmond" and "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel" has produced a piece of literature unique of its kind. He has nothing to learn of comedy in the abstract; he proved that long ago in the brilliant fragment on the comic spirit and its uses read by him at the Royal Institution. But it is a far cry from a proper understanding of comedy to an artistic exemplification of its function and capacities, and they are very few who have attempted the journey with success. Mr. Meredith is indisputably of their number. His book is fairly described as a Comedy in Chapters, for it has the same intention and the same relation to actuality and human life as the master-works of Molière. It is an epitome in narrative of a certain well-thumbed chapter in the great Book of Egoism—the chapter treating of the egoist in love, the egoist as he appears and is in his relations with woman;

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and in the figure of its hero, Sir Willoughby Patterne, Mr. Meredith has summed up enough of human nature to make it typical and heroic. Of course Sir Willoughby's story is as conventionally told as Alceste's own. Its personages are not human beings, but compendiums of humanity ; their language is not that of life and society pure and simple, but that of life and society as seen and heard through the medium of comedy ; the atmosphere they breathe is as artificially rare as that of Orgon's parlour. To live with them you must leave the world behind, and content yourself with essences and abstractions instead of substances and concrete things ; and you must forget that such vulgar methods as realism and naturalism ever were. Thus prepared, you will find "The Egoist," as far as its matter is concerned, a veritable guide to self-knowledge and a treatise on the species of wonderful value and comprehensiveness. As to its manner, that is a very different thing. I can well believe that there are many who will read "The Egoist" with impatience and regret, and many more who will not read it at all. To prepare one's self for its consideration with the "Imposteur" and "L'Ecole des Femmes" is a mistake. Mr. Meredith's style, it seems to me, has always been his weak point. Like Shakspeare, he is a man of genius, who is a clever man as well ; and he seems to prefer his cleverness to his genius. It is not enough for him to write a book that is merely great ; his book must also be brilliant and personal, or it is no book to him. It may be that in "The Egoist" his reckless

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individuality is less ill seen than in "Beauchamp" or "Emilia"; it may be that, as the inventor of a literary *genre*, he may insist on being criticised according to his own canons. Certain it is that in his Comedy in Chapters he has asserted himself more vigorously, if that were possible, than in any other of his works. It is a wilful hurly-burly of wit, wisdom, fancy, freakishness, irony, analysis, humour, and affectation; and you catch yourself wishing, as you might over Shakspeare, that Mr. Meredith were merely a great artist, and not so diabolically ingenious and sympathetic and well informed and intellectual as he is. Speaking for myself, I have read "The Egoist" with great and ever-increasing interest and admiration. To me it is certainly one of the ablest books of modern years. It is full of passion and insight, of wit and force, of truth and eloquence and nature. Its characters, from Sir Willoughby downwards, are brilliantly right and sound; it has throughout the perfect good breeding of high comedy; there is not a sentence in it, whether of dialogue or analysis or reflection, but is in some sort matter for applause. All the same, I cannot but believe that its peculiarities of form are such as must stand inevitably in the way of its success. I cannot but believe that, with all its astonishing merits, it will present itself to its warmest admirers as a failure in art, as art has hitherto been understood and practised. Mr. Meredith has written for himself, and it is odds but the multitude will decline to listen to him. Nor, so far as I can see, is the multitude alone to blame.

XX

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ON

THE EGOIST.

[From *Cope's Tobacco Plant*, vol. ii., No. 118, January, 1880, pp. 430-431, signed "Sigval."]

WHEN the *Tobacco Plant* ventured to assert and prophesy of George Meredith (May, 1879; article, "An Old New Book"): "He may be termed, accurately enough for a brief indication, the Robert Browning of our novelists; and his day is bound to come, as Browning's at length has come;" the writer little thought that day would come so soon. He knew that his author had been labouring nobly for about thirty years amidst general neglect, producing magnificent works immediately consigned to "that oblivion of oblivion which has never had any remembrance;" and he had read in a paper calling itself Literary a review of that same Old New Book, "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel," treating it as quite a new book, condemning it to the pillory, and pelting it there with such rotten eggs as these: "It would even be unjust to compare such writings (*sic*) with the

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scavengers and dust collectors of ordinary life. The latter are necessary to the cleanliness and health of the community, while the literary refuse and rubbish, etc. . . . a long series of paltry dialogue, of a surprisingly fervent nature. . . . When the author moralises, he does not halt for words, but chucks them in anyhow, dragging along with him a string of vapid nonsense."

With the appearance of "*The Egoist*" has come the dawning of Mr. Meredith's day, after a night so long and dreary and dense; during which, while working on undaunted, he must have had sore need of Schopenhauer's consolation: "The number of the years that elapse between the appearance of a book and its acknowledgment gives the measure of time that the author is in advance of his age. The entire neglect which my work has experienced proves that either I was unworthy of my age, or my age of me." The first clear light that I saw was reflected from the *Athenæum* (Nov. 1, 1879), in almost the first critique I had seen evincing the critic's familiarity (a familiarity breeding the very opposite of contempt) with all the writer's works. Here are a few rays: "He has considered sex—the great subject, the leaven of imaginative art—with notable audacity and insight. In his best work he ranks with the world's novelists. He is a companion for Balzac and Richardson, an intimate for Fielding and Cervantes. . . . In the world of man's creation his people are citizens to match the noblest; they are of the aristocracy of the imagination . . . there is no question but 'The

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Egoist' is a piece of imaginative work as solid and rich as any that the century has seen [I would except a very few others, among them two or three of Meredith's own, which are greater simply because their main theme is greater], and that it is not only one of its author's masterpieces, but one of the strongest and most individual performances of modern literature." This was cheering for a most devout admirer who had been watching through a quarter of a century for the dayspring, confounded by its prodigious delay. Other hills and hillocks caught the new radiance, kindling rapidly as the beacon-fires that announced the fall of Troy, or those others that signalled the approach of the Armada. Thus the *Pall Mall*: "One of the most striking works of our time. . . . Of extraordinary merit. . . . The work is so complete and elaborate as to be indescribable in the compass of a newspaper article." Similarly the *Spectator*, *Examiner*, *Daily News*, and I know not how many more. The last-named reflects: "It will be extremely interesting to see how the English public will take Mr. George Meredith's last publication. *The critics Mr. Meredith has had always with him. But critics cannot make a public*, and hence the uncertainty and amusement of watching the *honest English mind* over this last highly seasoned dish which Mr. Meredith has placed before it. Will the plain palates relish the exquisite savours of so delicate a wit? Will they appreciate the subtle essences he has cunningly distilled into the dish?" I have italicised the words from which I dissent.

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Firstly, if by critics the writer means public critics, as surely every reader must understand him to mean, I ask in amaze, When and where have they shown their appreciation of Mr. Meredith? I know of but one class or popular review or magazine which has called attention to his works as a whole—the *British Quarterly*, and that not until last April. And where in the high-class and literary weeklies are to be found anything like adequate appreciations of his previous books? Where, in the whole range of our periodical literature throughout the last twenty years, can one discover the tributes justly due to the magnificent genius and insight and energy, the wit and humour and passion of the 1859 "Richard Feverel," the "Modern Love, and other Poems," the "Emilia in England," the "Vittoria," the "Harry Richmond," the "Beauchamp's Career"? Why, even of this last, issued in three volumes in 1876, when the author had been twenty-five years before the public, I can find no notice in the "Contemporary Literature" department of the *Westminster Review*, though I find a whole separate article on Ouida's novels; in the *Athenæum* it is only noticed as one of a batch of six "Novels of the Week;" in the *Academy* also as one of a batch of six "New Novels," the critic, no less a man than Dr. Littledale, expressing himself thus: "Though written with much pains, considerable cleverness, and occasional sparkle, it exhibits too much effort . . . we rise from perusal with the conviction that it is not as a novelist that Mr. Meredith can look for a permanent name in literature. As critic or essayist

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there is probably a career open to him." Against these I am happy to cite *Cope's Tobacco Plant* (which had not put forth its precious leafage when the earlier books appealed to the dear deaf stupid public), uttering wisdom at its "Smoke Room Table" (June, 1876), in this wise: "We have the story of Nevil Beauchamp's love and love-perplexities told as none but George Meredith could tell it, with marvellous subtleties of insight and expression, and framed in scenes such as only he can suggest in a few swift words, instinct with spirit and luminous with beauty." And again: "We can cordially commend it and all his works to the meditative smoker, who grudgeth not several slow whiffs over a knotty point when the knot is really worth untying for the sake of that which it involves." Those knots, which neither the clumsy public nor the practised critics could untie, *Cope*, smoking, unravelled right deftly; and Nicotina, who is Wisdom, is justified of her children. Truly, if the critics have always been devoted to Mr. Meredith, it has been with a most secret devotion, never exposed to the vulgar eye; a devotion wonderfully like that of Balzac's discreet Napoleonists after Waterloo and the Restoration, proved unostentatiously by the capital N's and golden bees embroidered on their braces! (In "La Femme de Trente Ans," if I remember rightly). Secondly, the critics *can* make a public, and always *do* make a public if they set themselves to the work; and they do it with the greater ease because the English mind is *not* honest, any more than it is intelligent. The English mind follows the fashion;

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purchases what is cried up, irrespective of its real value ; applauds what is applauded, without knowing the reason why ; puts Shakespeare and Milton conspicuous on its bookshelves, disposes the most pious gilt-edged volumes on its drawing-room table, while really only enjoying its paper or its novel of the day. Thus the critics can make a public—that is, a demand—for any book, to the profit of the author ; and, if the book be good, to the profit of the community also ; for some of the volumes bought for mere fashion's sake must meet eyes that will read them for true love's sake.

Turning now to "The Egoist," it may, I think, be safely affirmed that Mr. Meredith's genius has never shown itself more keen and alert and brilliant, more thoroughly master of all the materials requisite for the work in hand ; and that his style has never been more swift and flexible and subtle for piercing to the inmost heart of his personages, through the triple armour of conventionality and deception and self-deception. As the work is a Comedy, it abounds in dialogue ; and I have long deemed Mr. Meredith's dialogue not only the best of our age, but unsurpassed, if equalled, in our whole literature : it is so spontaneous, unexpected, involuntary, diversified by the moods, the blood, the nerves, the ever-varying circumstances and relations of the interlocutors ; differing thus in kind from the dialogue of ordinary novels and plays just as the actual interview between any two or more persons differs from the suppositious interviews which each has mapped out beforehand.

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Even were there room here, I should not attempt a summary of the plot: and as for extracts, the whole book is a precious extract, "distilled thought in distilled words"; the studious reader has in Meredith, as in Browning, the delight—so rare in this age of infinite empty scribbling and interminable chronicling of the smallest of small beer—to find every sentence full-charged, "every rift loaded with ore," and with ore rich in metal. I must confine myself to merely indicating the chief characters, and giving one or two flying glimpses of quality. The central personage, Sir Willoughby Patterne, the Egoist, who with characteristic unconsciousness furnishes his own title, is, I presume, one of the most thoroughly studied and exhibited types in the whole range of literature. We get him by heart in all his stages and phases, from the highest to the lowest, from the surface to the centre; from his lordly magnificence and despotic bountifulness as the idol of his little world, to his most abject crouching and slinking through the sloughs of falsehood in evasion of the scorn or mockery of that very world he detests and despises. For there are tragic situations and passions here as in most great comedy; as the author well remarks at one point: "Jealousy had invaded him [Sir W.]. He had boasted himself above the humiliating visitation. If that had been the case, we should not have needed to trouble ourselves much about him. A run or two with the pack of imps [the invisible hounds of the hunting Comic Muse] would have satisfied us." Then there

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is Laetitia Dale, "with a romantic tale on her eye-lashes"; poetical, thoughtful, from girlhood the too humble adorer of the Egoist, who graciously permits her unsoliciting worship. After many years of hope deferred and patient suffering, she is an old woman of thirty, with her eyes at length sorely opening or opened; "she is coming three parts out of her shell, and wearing it as a hood for convenience." There is Clara Middleton, "dainty rogue in porcelain," the second betrothed of the Egoist, whose first betrothed, "the racing cutter," ran away and married another just before the appointed day. Clara is 19 to Sir W.'s 33, and her desperate struggles to get free from the engagement occupy a large portion of the book. There is Vernon Whitford, "the lean long-walker and scholar, Phœbus Apollo turned fasting friar"; who, drenched in a storm, "looked lean as a fork with the wind whistling through the prongs." He is Sir W.'s poor cousin and secretary; high-minded, austere, reticent; young, but with a sad past somewhat like that of George Warrington in "Pendennis." But in the end he burns out gloriously transfigured. He says of Clara, "She gives you an idea of the Mountain Echo." There is Horace de Craye, colonel in the Guards, handsome, ready-witted, Norman-Irishman, who says and does most excellent things, and plays an active part in the intrigue. There is Dr. Corney, also Irish, and a little more so, who drives Vernon demented by his eulogy of Clara: "I'll not call her perfection, for that's a post, afraid to move. But

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she's a dancing sprig of the tree next it. Poetry's wanted to speak of her. I'm Irish and inflammable, I suppose, but I never looked on a girl to make a man comprehend the entire holy meaning of the word rapturous like that one. . . . But you're a Grecian, friend Vernon. Now, couldn't you think her just the whiff of an idea of a daughter of a peccadillo goddess?" (Compare the delicate gradations of the Irishry, in part intentional, in diction and thought of the aristocratic guardsman and the jolly doctor, with the Cork brogue broad enough to hang your hat on of Mrs. Chump in "Emilia in England.") There is Crossjay, with whom Vernon charges himself, son of a very poor relative of Sir W., Capt. Patterne of the Marines; "a rosy-cheeked, round-bodied rogue of a boy of twelve, with the sprights of twelve boys in him, who fell upon meats and puddings, and defeated them, with a captivating simplicity in his confession that he had never had enough to eat in his life. . . . Subsequently he told his host and hostess that he had two sisters above his own age, and three brothers and two sisters younger than he: 'All hungry!' said the boy. His pathos was most comical." Crossjay is "real grit," and is of first-rate importance in the plot. There is Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson, the rich widow, kindly, but with a prompt, keen tongue, responsible for the character-definitions above quoted: "Her word sprang out of her. She looked at you, and forth it came; and it stuck to you, as nothing laboured or literary could have done." While grand

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phrases are mouthing round about Sir W. on the festival of his majority, she says, "You see he has a leg." There are two maiden aunts, mere amiable echoes and shadows of their idol the Egoist; and two titled ladies of the county, representatives of the inquisitive and tattling world. Lastly, there is the Rev. Dr. Middleton, the widowed father of Clara, a scholar with an independent fortune, whose strength and weakness is love of good living. He is of the family of Drs. Folliott and Oppimian, with whom you may have excellent converse in the "Crotchet Castle" and "Gryll Grange" of the humorous and caustic T. L. Peacock; but he develops robust individual characteristics. He pronounces upon another: "He is a fine scholar, but crochety, like all men who cannot take their Port." He *can* take his Port; and Port can take him (not overtake him, mind), as Sir W. discovers, and uses it with splendid effect on the doctor, with terrible recoil upon poor Clara. The richest chapter for jolly humour (I speak not of the subtle and recondite humour) in the whole work is the second of Vol. II., "An Aged and a Great Wine": the gradual mellowing, within the limits of clerical decorum, of the doctor under the influence of this, administered by the astute and patient designing Egoist, is unsurpassable. I must quote a little, to gain for this scanty notice the benediction, "All's well that ends well":—

SIR W.—"I am going to my inner cellar." DR. M.—
"An inner cellar!" "Sacred from the butler. . . . My

James Thomson

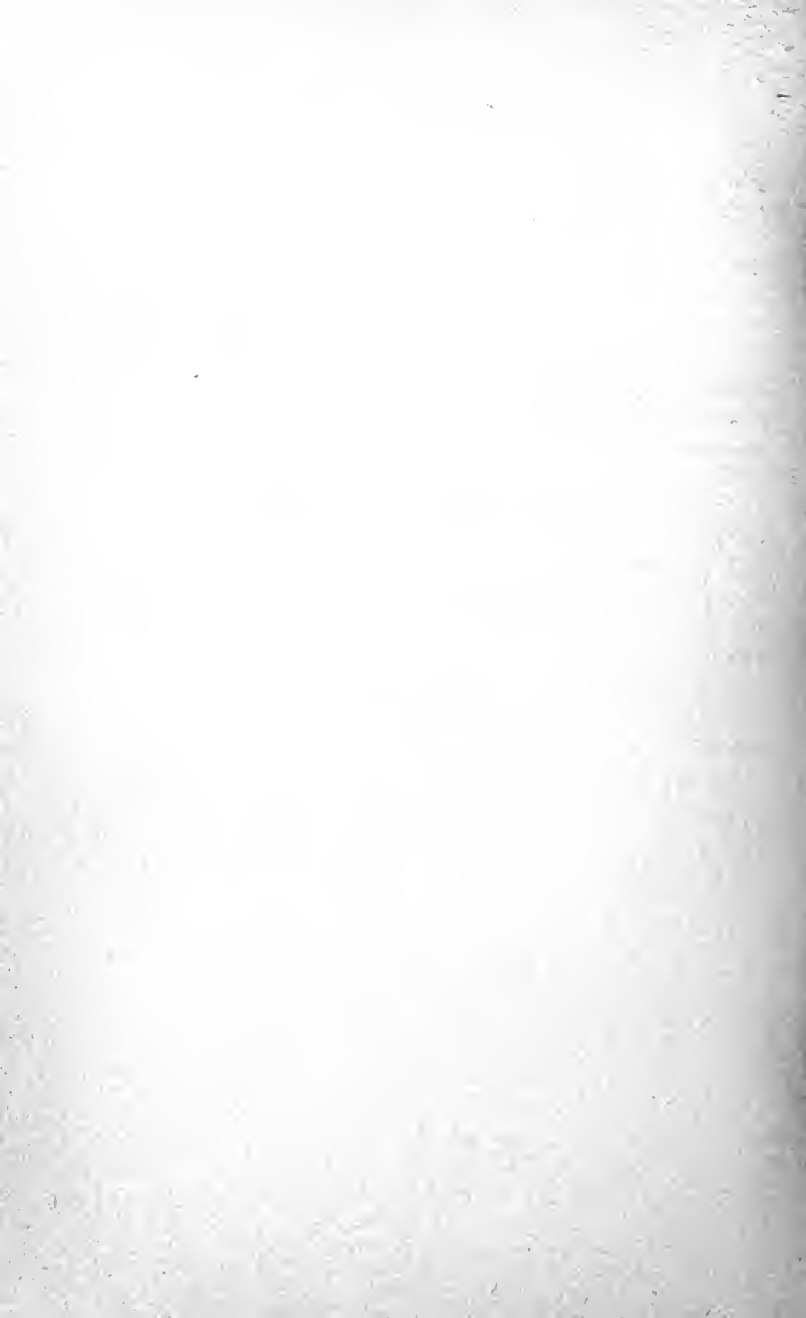
cellars are worth a visit." "Cellars are not catacombs. They are, if rightly constructed, cloisters, where the bottle meditates on joys to bestow, not on dust we misused ! Have you anything great?" "A wine aged ninety." "Is it associated with your pedigree, that you pronounce the age with such assurance?" "My grandfather inherited it." Your grandfather, Sir W., had meritorious offspring, not to speak of generous progenitors. What would have happened had it fallen into the female line ! I shall be glad to accompany you. Port ? Hermitage ? " "Port." "Ah ! We are in England !"

There was a chirrup in the Rev. doctor's tone : "Hocks, too, have compassed age. I have tasted senior Hocks. Their flavours are as a brook of many voices ; they have depth also. Senatorial Port ! we say. We cannot say that of any other wine. Port is deep-sea deep. It is in its flavour deep ; mark the difference. It is like a classic tragedy, organic in conception. An ancient Hermitage has the light of the antique ; the merit that it can grow to an extreme old age ; a merit. Neither of Hermitage nor of Hock can you say that it is the blood of those long years, retaining the strength of youth with the wisdom of age. To Port for that ! Port is our noblest legacy ! Observe, I do not compare the wines ; I distinguish the qualities. Let them live together for our enrichment ; they are not rivals like the Idæan Three. Were they rivals, a fourth would challenge them. Burgundy has great genius. It does wonders within its period ; it does all except to keep up in the race : it is short-lived. An aged Burgundy ends with a beardless Port. I cherish the fancy that Port speaks the sentences of wisdom, Burgundy sings the inspired Ode. Or put it, that Port is the Homeric hexameter, Burgundy the Pindaric dithyramb. What do you say ?" "The comparison is excellent, sir." "The distinction, you would remark.

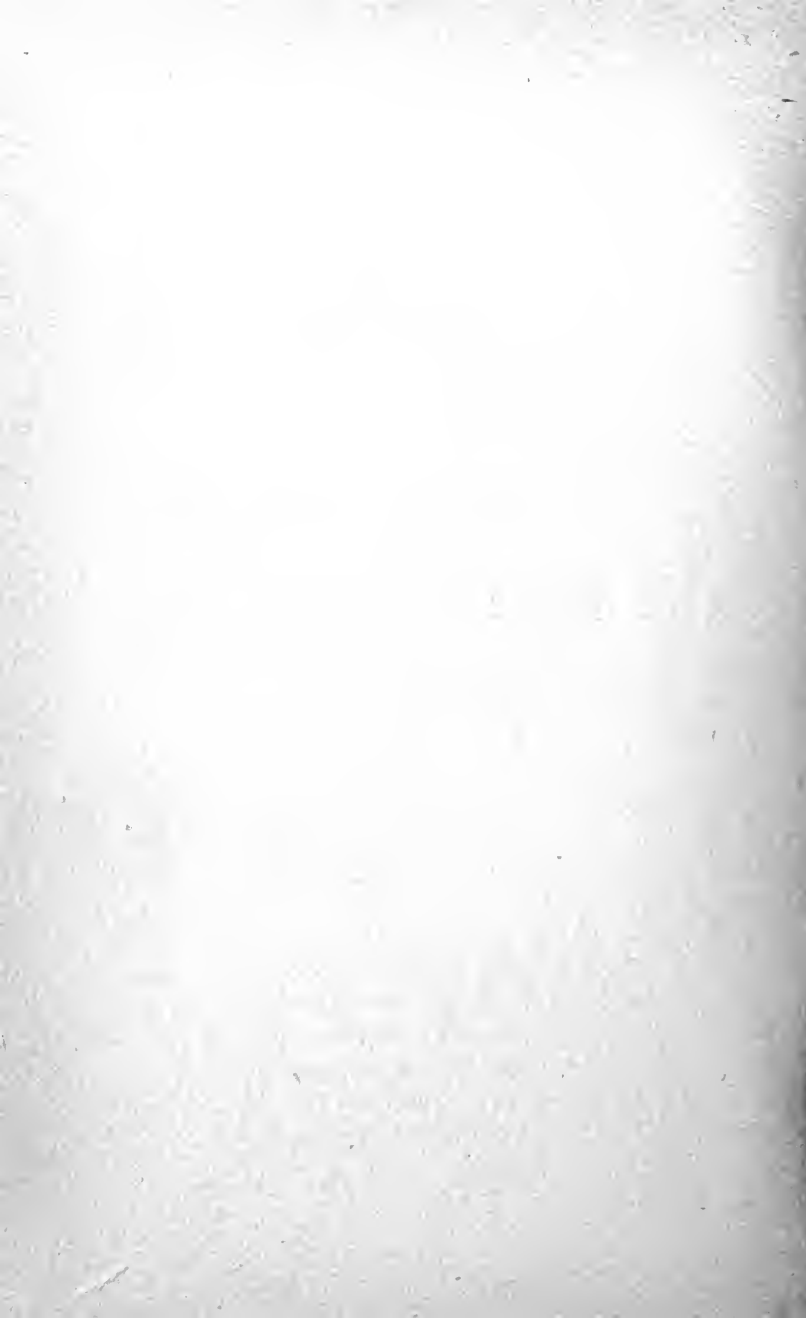
on The Egoist

Pindar astounds. But his elder brings us the more sustaining cup. One is a fountain of prodigious ascent. One is the unsounded purple sea of marching billows." "A very fine distinction." "I conceive you now to be commending the similes. They pertain to the time of the first critics of those poets. Touch the Greeks, and you can nothing new : all has been said : 'Graiis, . . . praeter laudem, nullius avaris.' Genius dedicated to Fame is immortal. We, sir, dedicate genius to the cloacaline floods. We do not address the unforgetting gods, but the popular stomach." . . . "Your opinion of the wine is favourable, sir?" "I will say this :—shallow souls run to rhapsody. I will say, that I am consoled for not having lived ninety years back, or at any period but the present, by this one glass of your ancestral wine." . . . A fresh decanter was placed before the doctor. He said : "I have but a girl to give !" He was melted.

Wherewith I commend the good reader to a book which he will find as well worth sipping slowly in long-lingering relish of its consummate fragrance and flavour and cordial potency, as the Rev. doctor found that noble nonagenarian Port ; Senatorial Port ! deep-sea deep !



THE TRAGIC COMEDIANS



XXI

JOSEPH JACOBS

ON

THE TRAGIC COMEDIANS

[From *The Athenæum*, No. 2776, January 8, 1881, pp. 49-50.]

MR. MEREDITH describes his new novel as "a study in a well-known story." As we have previously informed our readers,* the well-known story is that of the tragic fate of Ferdinand Lassalle, the Messiah, as he is called, of Social Democracy. His lurid career is one of the most remarkable episodes in modern history. Equipped with all the culture of his age, as he himself boasted, he became the ruling mind of the German working classes. In 1863 it was commonly said in Germany that the two foremost men of the Fatherland were Count Bismarck and Ferdinand Lassalle. In the next year, in the prime of life, he fell in a duel, brought about by an almost insane passion for a young girl under twenty. It was natural that a career like this should attract the interest of Mr. George Meredith, who has always displayed most power in treating of the phenomenal (he terms it the "fantastical") in human nature.

* *The Athenæum*, No. 2769, p. 676, November 20, 1880.

Joseph Jacobs

While his subject is congenial to Mr. Meredith, his method of treating it is rather unusual among novelists of the first rank. Shakspeare's method in the Roman plays is the nearest parallel that suggests itself. One of the well-known facts of this well-known story is that in 1879 its heroine, Frau von Racowitza, published an *apologia* of the part played by her in the tragedy of fifteen years before. What Plutarch was to Shakspeare, Frau von Racowitza has been to Mr. Meredith. It was only just that in dealing with an historical event recourse should be had to historical sources. But some care might have been taken to verify the accuracy of Frau von Racowitza's account; she confesses that she trusts entirely to memory, having kept no diary, and the dialogues with which she enlivens her book at once become suspect. Against her "Elle et lui" Herr Kutschbach has published a "Lui et elle," entitled "Lassalle's Tod," based in the main on some revelations made by Lassalle's literary executor. These "Enthüllungen" were equally accessible, yet we find no trace of Mr. Meredith's having consulted them, though an allusion on p. 74 of the second volume indicates that he has read Mr. Ludlow's paper in the *Fortnightly Review* of 1869. Mr. Meredith's study of this well-known subject does not appear to have been particularly profound, and he has been content to follow, step by step, the story of Lassalle's death as told by the lady who caused it. Every important incident in the novel is taken *sine grano salis* from "Meine

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Beziehungen zu Ferdinand Lassalle." Mr. Meredith says :—

"Nor is there anything invented, because an addition of fictitious incidents could never tell us how she came to do this, he to do that."

But it is difficult to say that incidents have not become fictitious when they have been kept in a lady's memory for fifteen years.

But not only is every incident borrowed from this somewhat untrustworthy source ; a large part of the conversations are adapted from Frau von Racowitza's book. Before the lady met Lassalle, she says she became interested in him by finding from a common friend that Lassalle and she had many ideas in common. The conversation in which she learned this is given as follows in the two books (we omit, in each case, the comments of the author):—

"Sie kennen Lassalle."

"Nein."

"Sie kennen ihn doch !
So kann nur eine Dame
sprechen die Lassalle kennt
und seine Gedanken theilt."

"Nein, gewiss nicht !
wer ist's denn ?"

"O pfui ! verleugnen Sie
ihn nicht ! lassen Sie das
den kleinen Seelen um uns
her. Reichen wir uns die
Hände und sagen wir mit

"I see you know Alvan."

"Indeed I do not."

"Surely you must ; where
is the lady who could talk
and think as you do without
knowing Alvan and sharing
his views !"

"But I do not know
him at all ; I have never
met him, never seen him.
I am unlikely to meet the
kind of person."

"Come, come, let us be

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Stolz: wir kennen und lieben ihn."

"Ach was—lassen Sie mich mit dem langweiligen fremden Menschen zufrieden! Ich kenne ihn nicht. Ich gebe Ihnen mein Wort—mein Ehrenwort! Glauben Sie mir jetzt?"

"Jetzt muss ich es wohl, aber dann bedaure ich Sie und ihn nur jede Stunde die Ihr Euch nicht kennt, die Ihr Euch fern bleibt. Denn Ihr sind wie für einander geschaffen."

honest. That is all very well for the little midges floating round us to say of Alvan, but we two can clasp hands and avow proudly that we both know and love the man."

"Were it true I would own it at once, but I repeat that he is a total stranger to me."

"Actually?"

"In honour."

"You have never met, never seen him, never read any of his writings?"

"Never. I have heard his name, that is all."

"Then I pity him, and you no less, while you remain strangers, for you were made for one another."

It is fair to add that Mr. Meredith invents the phrases which had caused the young officer to think Clotilde had known Alvan. But the parallel is sufficiently close to merit the name of translation. And this occurs continually throughout Mr. Meredith's book. We refer our readers to pp. 37-8, 42, 44, 56, 107-8, 112, 137-40 of the German, as compared with pp. 45-6, 80, 87, 102, 138-9, 148, 179-82 of the first volume of Mr. Meredith's "study." In the second volume it must be granted the parallels are not so

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frequent, and throughout the comments on the conversations and incidents are quite in Mr. Meredith's own vein. But such an amount of indebtedness surely deserved some more explicit acknowledgment than the following sentences at the end :—

“ Years later she wrote her version of the story, not sparing herself so much as she supposed. Providence and her parents were not forgiven. But as we are in her debt for some instruction, she may now be suffered to go.”

There is a process familiar to those who have studied Latin composition by the name of *oratio obliqua*. Mr. Meredith's “Tragic Comedians” is a study in oblique narration ; he has turned the first person of his original into the third and added his own comments. It accordingly becomes somewhat difficult to see what there is in this book to criticize. The plot and much of the conversation are due to Frau von Racowitza, and the interest its characters arouse is as much owing to historical suggestion as to the art of the novelist. What remains of Mr. Meredith's own is his style, and this, as everyone knows, is peculiarly his own. Mr. Meredith has a habit of condensing epigrams into adverbs and allegories into adjectives, which render his sentences stimulating, but at the same time somewhat hard reading. He writes, as it were, by flashes of lightning—throws out a hint where others would indite a paragraph. He is sometimes peculiarly happy at hitting off a character in a phrase. “The To-morrower” is his graphic way of describing Clotilde's irresolution. We might

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attempt to adopt his own method of condensation, and call his style the "congested." It is overwrought—too full of suggestion. As a specimen of it at its best a passage may be quoted in which Mr. Meredith makes Alvan (or Lassalle) describe the character of Bismarck:—

"Yes, Ironsides is a fine fellow! but he and I may cross. His ideas are not many. The point to remember is that he is iron on them: he can drive them hard into the density of the globe. He has quick nerves and imagination: he can conjure up, penetrate, and traverse complications—an enemy's plans, all that the enemy will be able to combine, and the likeliest that he will do. Good. We opine that we are equal to the same. He is for kingcraft to mask his viziercraft—and save him the labour of patiently attempting oratory and persuasion, which accomplishment he does not possess:—it is not in iron. *We* think the more precious metal will beat him when the broader conflict comes. But such an adversary is not to be underrated. I do not under-rate him; and certainly not he me. Had he been born with the gifts of patience and a fluent tongue, and not a petty noble, he might have been for the people, as knowing them the greater power. He sees that their knowledge of their power must eventually come to them. In the meantime his party is forcible enough to assure him he is not fighting a losing game at present: and he is, no doubt, by lineage and his traditions monarchical. He is curiously simple, not really cynical. His apparent cynicism is sheer irritability. His contemptuous phrases are directed against obstacles: against things, persons, nations that oppose him or cannot serve his turn: against his king, if his king is restive; but he respects his king: against your friends' country, because there is no fixing it to a line of policy, and

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it seems to have collapsed ; but he likes that country the best in Europe after his own. He is nearest to contempt in his treatment of his dupes and tools, who are dropped out of his mind when he has quite squeezed them for his occasion ; to be taken up again when they are of use to him. Hence he will have no following. But let me die to-morrow, the party I have created survives. In him you see the dam, in me the stream. Judge, then, which of us gains the future ! —admitting that in the present he may beat me. He is a Prussian, stoutly defined from a German, and yet again a German stoutly defined from our borderers ; and that completes him. He has as little the idea of humanity as the sword of our Hermann, the cannon-ball of our Frederick. Observe him. What an eye he has ! I watched it as we were talking :—and he has, I repeat, imagination ; he can project his mind in front of him as far as his reasoning on the possible allows : and that eye of his flashes ; and not only flashes, you see it hurling a bolt ; it gives me the picture of a Balearic slinger about to whizz the stone : for that eye looks far, and is hard, and is dead certain of its mark—within his practical compass, as I have said.”

It is somewhat difficult to judge this novel “on its merits.” If we had not read Frau von Racowitza’s book we might have placed “The Tragic Comedians” very high among the brilliant productions with which Mr. Meredith has enriched English fiction. And certainly readers who are ignorant of the original will do well to read Mr. Meredith’s adaptation, which is as stimulating in style, and at least as lucid in arrangement, as anything else he has given to the world.

XXII

THE DAILY NEWS

ON

THE TRAGIC COMEDIANS

[From *The Daily News*, No. 10852, p. 3, January 27, 1881.]

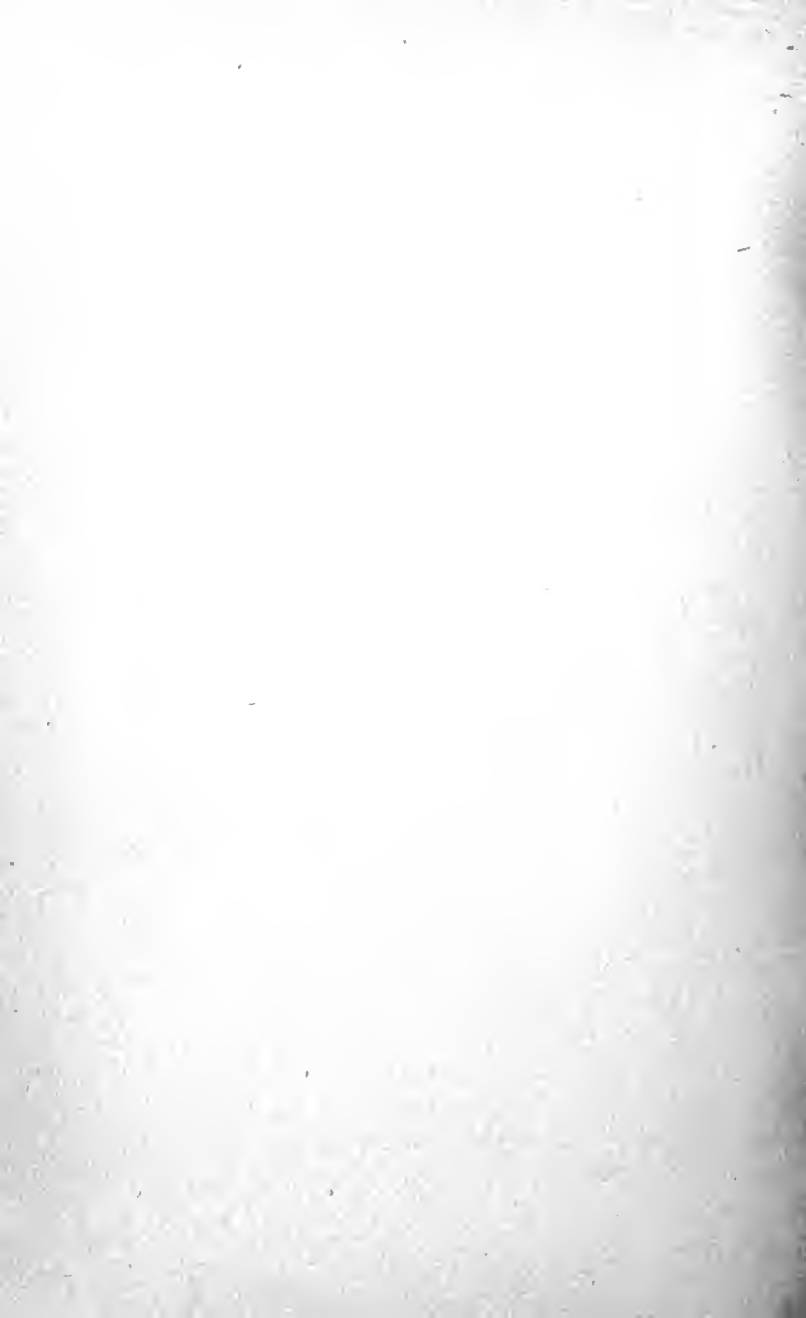
MR. GEORGE MEREDITH may well call the hero and heroine of his two latest volumes "The Tragic Comedians" (Chapman and Hall). The tragedy of the story is profound if the comedy of it is fantastical. To turn back from the last chapter, detailing the miserable end of an almost insane passion, and read again the scene in which the two chief actors in it first met, is like taking a survey of human action such as may provoke the gods to amazement and scornful laughter. The luminous atmosphere of intellectual and emotional life in which Alvan and Clotilde meet for the first time, the electric flashes their natures strike forth in their spiritual contact, and the height of sincere passion one of them reaches, and the other at least touches through sympathy and attraction, form a contrast to the mean and mournful catastrophe it was all to end in so striking that it seems to reveal human nature under a fresh and most fantastic light. That the events are historical, not fictitious, adds to

The Daily News on The Tragic Comedians

the excitement of the narration, while it in no way lessens our sense of the skill, brilliance, and power of the writer who describes them. It is no less the worthy work of a student of the comedy of life to analyse and explain the strange, abnormal character he finds ready to his hand than to build up from imaginative sources ideal figures which he moulds to his own will. So extraordinary, to use Mr. Meredith's own word, so incredible is the conduct of the two beings who acted and re-acted on each other to their common destruction and to the world's loss, that were it invented people would reject it as, if not quite impossible, certainly too improbable for artistic use. Some modification of the apparent incongruity may perhaps be sought for in the circumstance that this tragic story of the German "Elle et Lui" has been taken from the version of "Elle" alone. Certain it is that no two people ever appear to have stood closer to a great happiness and missed it than the Alvan and Clotilde of Mr. Meredith's parable. It is true he cannot tell us "how she came to do this, he to do that, or how the comic in their natures led by interplay to the tragic issue." But he has in a wonderful way, and with a command of brilliant language all his own, analysed and commented on an episode of life as strange, as mystifying, and as interesting as is to be found in the repertory of the world's dramas. The personages are few and the action brief. Fateful, however, and tragic is the story as an old Greek play.



POEMS AND LYRICS OF THE
JOY OF EARTH



XXIII

MARK PATTISON

ON

POEMS AND LYRICS OF THE JOY OF EARTH

[From *The Academy*, vol. xxiv., No. 585, pp. 37-38, July 21, 1883.]

THIS is one of the most remarkable, perhaps the most remarkable, of the volumes of verse which have been put out during the last few years. But, indeed, the name of the author is a sufficient guarantee that so it would be; Mr. George Meredith is known to be little given to offering his readers that which is common.

Mr. Meredith is well known, by name, to the widest circle of readers—the novel-readers. By name, because his name is a label warning them not to touch. They know that in volumes which carry that mark they will not find the comfortable conventionalities and paste diamonds which make up their ideal of “life.” Worse than this, Mr. Meredith’s prose requires attention—an impertinent requirement on the part of a novelist. Everybody knows that we go to a novel

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in order that we may occupy a vacant mind without giving attention.

To a higher, and vastly smaller, circle of readers, Mr. Meredith's stories—"The Ordeal of Richard Feverel," "Emilia in England," "Vittoria," "The Egoist"—are known as creations, singular without being eccentric, but whose singularity is marked by an imaginative presentment rather than by any special attraction of the characters and events presented. There is an atmosphere of poetry about the doings of his personages which gives us a happy fairy-land sensation, even when, as is often the case, we do not much care for the doings themselves. The circle (a select one) of the readers of these novels, know that Mr. Meredith is a poet—in prose. Perhaps some of them may not know that he is a poet in the more usual acceptation of the term. Two little ventures of the usual "minor poetry" class, some thirty or more years back, had the inevitable fate of such volumes, came into the hands of but few, and were soon forgotten even by them. As Mr. Meredith does not include these poems in the list of his works which he has allowed to be given on the fly-leaf of the present volume, perhaps he is now unwilling to own them, and desires to have them regarded as "juvenilia." Any comparison of the present George Meredith with the George Meredith who had not yet stamped his quality upon "The Shavings (sic) of Shagpat" would be waste of labour. Yet I could almost fancy that more than one of the pieces in the new volume are

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developments of germs deposited in the earlier epoch of thought.

What is true of a whole poetic career is also true of any volume of collected pieces composed at long intervals. No one, not even a critic, is always at his best. But in poetry we may go further, and say that the best of any poet is so rare and costly that it is indeed "*paucorum horarum*." Take, *e.g.*, the six volumes of Wordsworth's *Poetical Works*, and count the pieces—nay, rather, the lines—in which Wordsworth is at Wordsworth's best. We may strike out everything written after 1809, the most of it being not only below Wordsworth, but absolutely unworthy of him. All that is instinct with vital power in Wordsworth might be contained in a volume of much less compass than Mr. Matthew Arnold's *Selections*. A few sheets of letterpress would give us all that can live of Wordsworth—all except the Wordsworthian "Self"; and to distil this essence we must have the whole of the nine books of the "Excursion" and the whole of the fourteen books of the "Prelude."

It is, therefore, no disparagement to say of the poems in the present volume that they are unequal in poetic merit. They all have the Meredithian quality, but in varying degrees of perfection. They are all out of the same vineyard, but of different vintages. To come to details, "Love in the Valley," *e.g.*, does not rise in general conception and design above the average level of the "minor poet" as we know him. For this reason it will probably be one of the most popular. It has also the ordinary fault

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of the modern English poetry—diffuseness, the beating out of a small particle of metal into too thin foil. Yet "Love in the Valley" is redeemed from commonness by single strokes which are not within the reach of every day, as well as by a vigour of language which is Mr. Meredith's own property among all his competitors. Take this stanza, descriptive of morning light :—

"Happy, happy time, when the white star hovers
Low over dim fields fresh with bloomy dew,
Near the face of dawn, that shows athwart the darkness,
Threading it with colour, like yew berries the yew.
Thicker crowd the shades as the grave East deepens
Glowing, and with crimson a long cloud swells.
Maiden still the morn is, and strange she is and secret ;
Strange her eyes ; her cheeks are cold as cold sea-shells."

I do not defend "bloomy" here said of dew. Mr. Meredith might have learned the meaning of "bloomy" from Milton, who uses it properly of the spray bursting into leaf in an English April. To apply "bloomy" to dew is too like that displacement of epithet which is one of the tricks by which the modern school of poets seeks to supply a spurious originality.

"The Lay (sic) of the Daughter of Hades" is also liable to the charge of diffuseness. And it has the more serious fault of being a versified treatment of a legend provided by the Greek mythology. Because the Greek mythology is the most poetical known to us, it is natural to conceive that it must be good "material" for a poem. It was still possible in

on Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth

Milton's day, it was just possible for Gray, to vivify a classical myth. Even Gray only appeals to "Delphi's Steep," etc., incidentally ; he does not insist on the classic theme. In the time in which we live, classical personages are too remote from the imaginative sphere of all but a score or two of Greek scholars to be helps to illusion. The nineteenth-century poetical reader knows nothing of Grecian Sicily. It is superadding another difficulty, which is superfluous, to one which is inherent in the nature of the case. We have to make a separate effort to get together the Greek imagery, in addition to the effort which all poetry demands of passing beyond the stereotype forms of every-day life to the spirit within them. Skiageneia, the daughter of Hades, is a thoroughly Burne Jones maiden, tall as a poplar, with a "throat" and a wan smile, with "redness that streamed through her limbs in a flitting glow."

The piece which gives its character to the volume, and raises the whole above the average of the reproductions of Rossetti with which we are familiar, is the first, which is entitled "The Woods of Westermmain." This piece seizes the imagination with a power which the vague and rather featureless "Daughter of Hades" does not possess. Many poets have signalled the romance that lies in forest depths, "the calling shapes and beckoning shadows." No poetical forest has surpassed in wealth of suggestion "the woods of Westermmain." In these woods is no wizardry ; no supernatural agents are at work. But if you enter them with a poet's eye and a poet's sensibility, you

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may see and hear that natural magic which surpasses all the fictitious tales of sorcerers, witches, wood gods, of Fauns and Dryads. The poem teaches, not didactically—for nothing is farther from its form or its thought than the inculcation of doctrine—how what we see depends upon what we are; how transcendent influences are only to be approached through the real—the transmuted by the soul of the seer :

“ Even as dewlight off the rose
In the mind a jewel sows.
Look you with the soul you see’t.”

The doctrine is old enough; the psychology of religion and that of poetry agree in it. Keats's *Endymion*, baffled in the search of the ideal, learns to find it in the real. In “the woods of Westermain” —ordinary woods, peopled only by the squirrel and the snake, the green woodpecker and the night-jar—you may read the whole history of the origin and development of things, from the time “when mind was mud,” “earth a slimy spine, Heaven a space for winging tons.” It is wholly in your own power what you shall make of earth. As you choose to look, she is either a dust-filled tomb or radiant with the blush of morning. Gaze under, and the soul is rich past computing. You must not only look, you must put off yourself, sink your individuality, you must let her “two-sexed meanings melt through you, wed the thought.” Your rich reward will not only be in the power of understanding, but in a quickening

on Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth

joy, the "joy of earth" showered upon you without stint.

"Drink the sense the notes infuse
You a larger self will find ;
Sweetest fellowship ensues
With the creatures of your kind."

In contrast with the pessimistic tone and despairing notes of the modern school, Mr. Meredith offers "a song of gladness," and smiles with Shakespere at a generation "ranked in gloomy noddings over life."

Such seems to be the drift of this remarkable lyric, remarkable rather for its expression than for its contents. Unfortunately, Mr. Meredith's healthy wisdom is veiled in the obscurity of a peculiar language which makes even his general drift doubtful, and the meaning of many score lines absolute darkness. Some writers, whom it is a fashion to admire, are obscure by twisting plain things with words that are not plain. They make platitudes into verbal puzzles. Mr. Meredith's obscurity proceeds from a better motive. He knows that poetry can only suggest, and destroys itself if it affirms. And as the moods he desires to suggest are remote from common experience, so also must the suggestive imagery be. Even the English language is inadequate to his requirements, and he tries to eke it out by daring compounds. The same resource tried long ago by Aeschylus was found to degenerate into bombast in a language which lends itself more readily to compounds than ours does. In Mr. Meredith's

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lines these compounds have seldom the merit of being happily formed or of condensing expression. If we allow that their use originated in the poverty of the existing language, the habit of employing them constantly and upon all occasions grows up from their trouble-saving convenience. They are stopgaps, and fill the place when the sense cannot be moulded into words proper without an expenditure of time which no modern writer will give. That the habit has settled itself upon Mr. Meredith's pen the following sample, taken from a very few pages, will show. We have—poppy-droop; bronze-orange; swan-wave; shore-bubble; rock-sourced; lost-to-light; instant-glancing; iron-resounding; spear-fitted; fool-flushed; ripple-feathered; dew-delighted; fountain-showers; stripe-shadowed; treasure-armful; circle-windsails; bully-drawlers; and so on without stint or limit. How many in the above collection, gathered at random, can be said to recommend themselves by their own elegance, or to be indispensable to the sense required, which most do but feebly express?

That I may not take an ungracious leave of a volume in which may be found so much to interest, I give a specimen of the sonnets, of which there are some twenty-three in the volume.

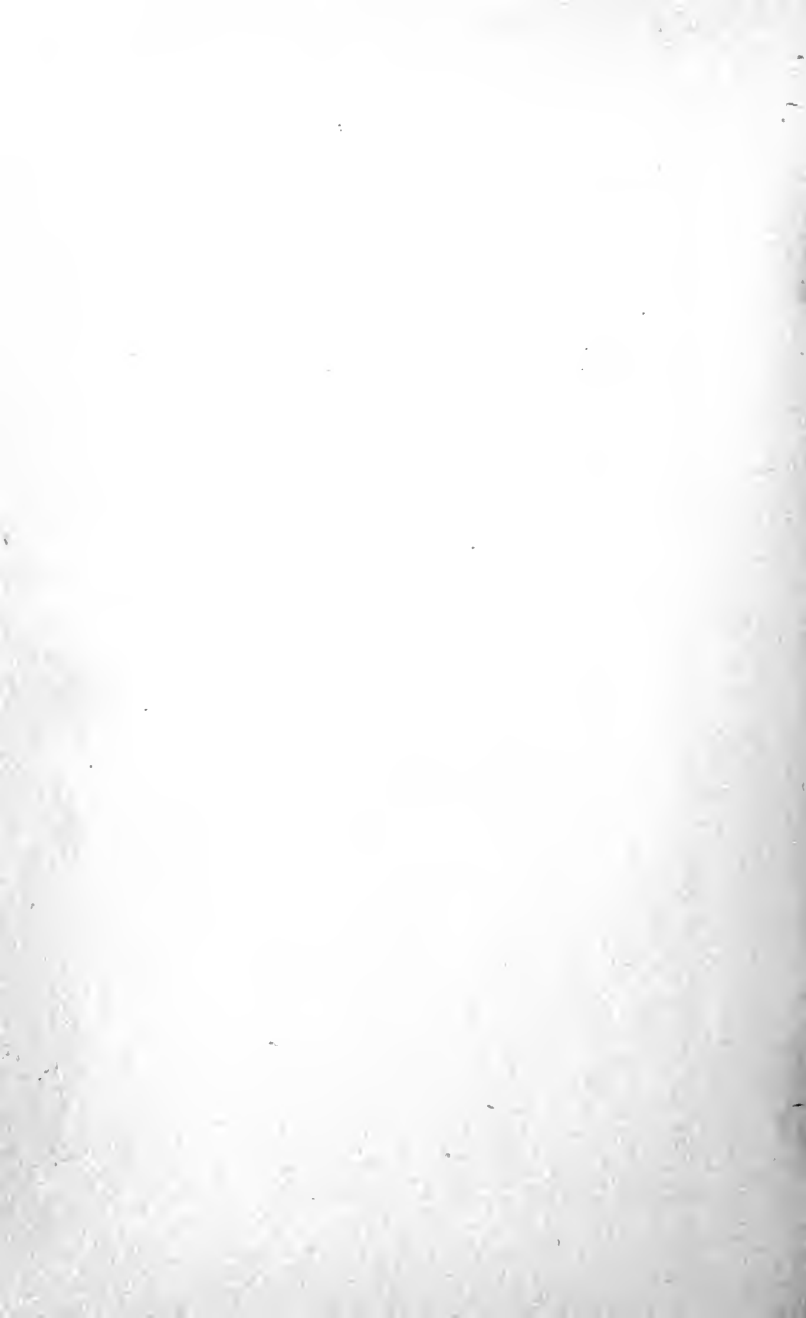
EARTH'S SECRET.

“Not solitarily in fields we find
Earth's secret open, though one page is there;
Her plainest, such as children spell and share
With bird and beast; raised letters for the blind.

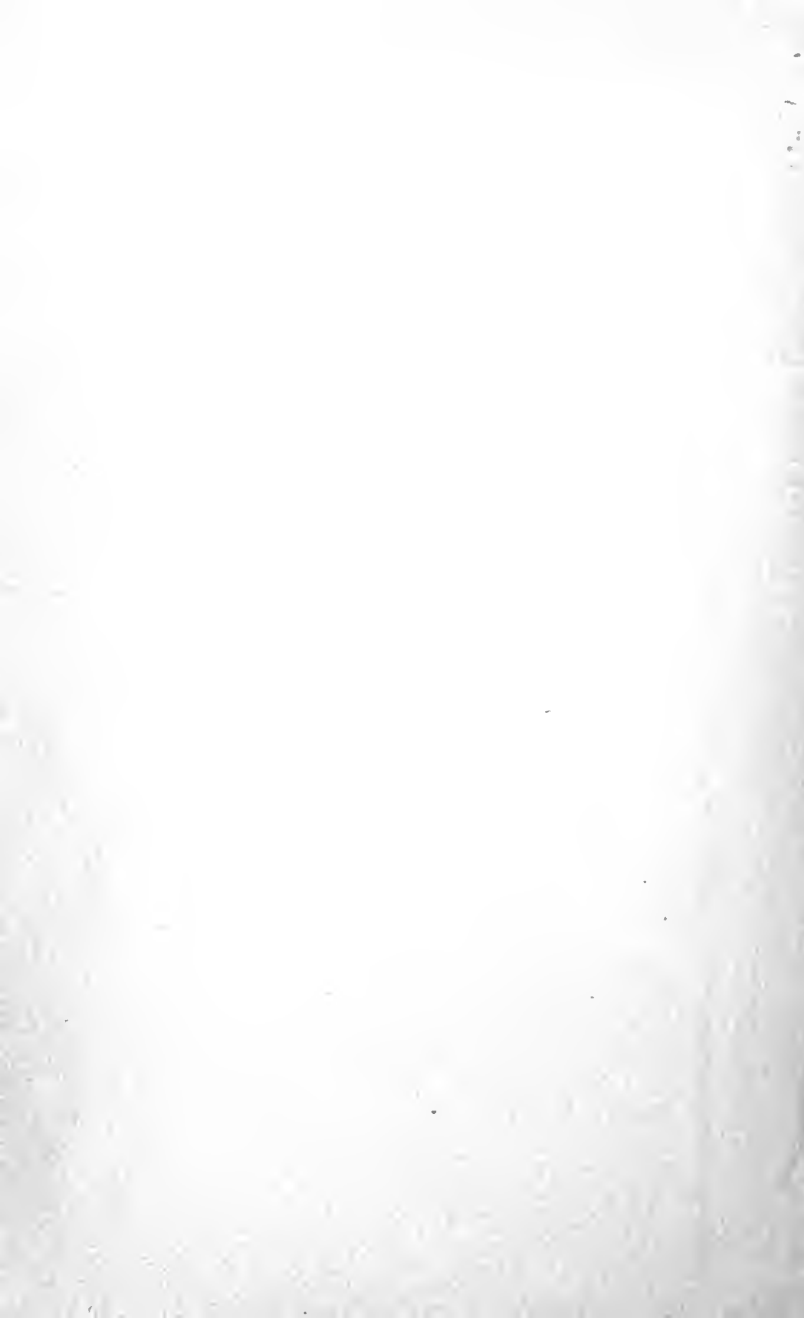
on Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth

Not where the troubled passions toss the mind,
In turbid cities, can the key be bare.
It hangs for those who hither thither fare,
Close interthreading nature with our kind.
They hearing History speak of what men were
And have become, are wise. The gain is great
In vision and solidity; it lives.
Yet at a thought of life apart from her
Solidity and vision lose their state
For Earth that gives the milk, the spirit gives."

THE END







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